Sexuality in David Copperfield

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For my father.

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Abbreviations

DP Foucault, Michel. Discipline and Punish. Trans. Alan Sheridan. New York: Random House, 1979.

HS Foucault, Michel. The History of Sexuality (Vol.1). Trans. Robert Hurley. New York: Random House, 1980.

Abstract

This thesis examines the sexual issues and visions of sexual experience that arise in Dickens' David Copperfield. The theoretical basis for this examination is Michel Foucault's The History of Sexuality (Vol.1) In this work Foucault argues that during the nineteenth century sexuality was discussed and analysed as much, if not more than, it has been in our own century; that through various discourses a norm of sexuality was established, a norm against which all forms of sexual behaviour were defined and categorised. This transformation of sex into discourse resulted in the initiation of sexual heterogeneities.

The process that Foucault outlines suggests firm links with the creation of class hegemony. In the nineteenth century the emerging middle classes lacked a coherent class identity and it was this that they sought through the formation of new codes relating to sexual and moral issues.

This thesis incorporates a discussion of David Copperfield as autobiographical fiction and the extent to which David's own narrative can be regarded as "truth". This reading of the novel centres on a view of David, a respectable middle-class gentleman, as supervisor of a panoptic structure, within which the world of the novel exists. His observations of the various domestic "cells" within this structure initiate the identification of a variety of peripheral sexualities, which correspond with those outlined in Foucault's History of Sexuality.

Through this process David is shown to redefine and reinforce his own middle-class status. To the extent that this process of categorisation and marginalisation of peripheral sexualities, this endorsement of middle-class hegemony, is reproduced in this narrative, it can be said that David Copperfield is complicit with the general discourse on sexuality as outlined by Foucault in Volume one of The History of Sexuality.

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SECTION ONE

Introduction

But it is perhaps the chief glory of the Victorian age in literature, and that which makes its great novelists even greater, that it kept its vices out of sight and did not parade them in the drawing-room.

C.J. Woollen.

The study of sexuality in Victorian literature has been a fashionable one in recent decades and, because of his prominence in the period, Dickens has been a popular author for such study. In many ways his work has always been seen as encapsulating the Victorian experience; hence a tendency has evolved to treat the writing of Dickens as "truth". What is particularly interesting, however, is the extent to which critics of Dickens have differed in terms of the "truth" that they have seen. This is nowhere more evident than when one examines the opinions of critics regarding the existence of sexuality in his work. In The Violent Effigy, a study of Dickens' imagination, John Carey sums up much of the criticism that has been directed at Dickens' work thus:

> It is generally agreed that the biggest gap in his achievement consists in his failure to portray even once with any kind of fullness or understanding, a normal sexual relationship. There is no-one, in the whole of Dickens' massive output, who, to quote Angus Wilson, "gives woman the true dignity of a whole body and a whole mind." (154)

Carey adds that some critics of a religious bent have found the sexlessness in Dickens' work a recommendation: "Mr A.E. Dyson remarks of David Copperfield, "One continuing strand in the book is the thought that love can be independent of sex and is greater than sex; this strikes me as true" (154).

John Carey, however, does not share this view. For him the problem is not a lack of sexuality within Dickens' novels but, rather, that sex is "driven underground, to emerge in perverted and inhibited forms" (154). In saying this he refers to David Copperfield, asking "is the love of David for Steerforth really "independent of sex", except for the most innocent of readers?" (154)[1]

John Carey's analysis of sexuality in the work of Dickens, so at odds with that of A.E. Dyson, raises an interesting question. Why, or how, have critics managed to reach such differing conclusions? The answer to this question is evident enough. Everyone is a product of their times and, as such, is influenced by their own society's views on certain issues. Writing on Dickens and sex in the

1970's John Carey was approaching the topic from the perspective of a man living in an age of relative sexual permissiveness. It was also an age that had firm views regarding the position of sexuality in the Victorian period.

> With the emergence of sexology at the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth century, the Victorian age began to be portrayed as an era of sexual repression. This image took on a renewed significance during the 1960's and 1970's. With the idea of sexual liberation and the shift towards a new 'permissiveness', the Victorian age was seen as the paradigm of sexual and moral hypocrisy. It was characterized as a period of public purity and private vice, with an outward show of respectability hiding an underbelly of pornography and prostitution. (Nead 2)

One does not have to look far to discover examples of literature of this period that support this view. One such example is Ronald Pearsall's Public Purity, Private Shame, Victorian Sexual Hypocrisy Exposed, a work whose title speaks for itself.[2] In his introduction Pearsall speaks of the "conspiracy of silence" that existed surrounding matters of sexuality in the period. He writes:

> It was a gigantic failure of communication at a time when communication had reached a sophistication that would have been undreamt of a century before. One could find out everything about anything - provided that it did not concern the relation of the sexes, or sex itself. (Pearsall 8-9)

It is worth noting, too, that this attitude towards the Victorian period has not, for the most part, changed. Proof enough is found in the common usage of the word "Victorian", which still frequently denotes an attitude that is puritanical or *closed* in some respect. One can go so far as to suggest that it is used to indicate a particular *sexual* attitude or an attitude relating to matters of discipline.

I mention the work of John Carey and the attitudes towards Victorian sexuality which influenced him for two reasons. Firstly, the variety of opinions expressed regarding the presence of sexuality in Dickens were what first attracted me to this topic. Secondly, in writing a thesis on sexuality in David Copperfield I hope to correct what I see as inadequacies in work previously undertaken;

inadequacies that I believe are illustrated in John Carey's comments. In Sexuality in Victorian Literature John Maynard writes:

> Our challenge is to look now, without polemics and presuppositions about what Victorian sexuality was but with live critical intelligence, at the variety of sexual issues and visions of sexual experience presented in Victorian literature. Above all, we now need more careful studies of individual authors and works to see what they said about sexual issues and how they said it. With the clarity provided by such studies, we may eventually be able to make out a more satisfactory, far less simplified picture, than we have had so far of the complexity of the Victorians' sexual experience and their writing about that experience. (265)

My intention here is to take up this challenge by examining the sexual issues and visions of sexual experience that arise in Dickens' David Copperfield.

In recent years the arguments of commentators who point to the Victorian period as being sexually repressive have come under scrutiny. This is primarily because of the work of Michel Foucault, whose The History of Sexuality (Vol. I) paints a revisionist picture of sexuality in the Victorian period which has proved very useful to those studying the period and various aspects relating to it. In this work Foucault dispels many of the myths that have surrounded the subject of sexuality in the nineteenth century; myths that have coloured much of the criticism relating to the literature of that period.

While writers such as Ronald Pearsall refer to a "conspiracy of silence" relating to sexual matters in the nineteenth century, Foucault argues that during the nineteenth century sexuality was discussed and analysed as much as, if not more than, it has been in our own century. While acknowledging that at the level of language sexuality was controlled and expurgated and that codes came into place regulating among which speakers and within which social relationships matters of sexuality could and should be discussed, he sees a society that produced a steady proliferation of discourses concerned with sex.

> Here I am thinking not so much of the probable increase in "illicit" discourses, that is, discourses of infraction that crudely named sex by way of insult or mockery of the new code of decency; the tightening up of the rules of decorum likely did

> produce, as a countereffect, a valorization and intensification of indecent speech. But more important was the multiplication of discourses of sex in the field of the exercise of power itself: an institutional desire to speak about it, and to do so more and more; a determination on the part of the agencies of power to hear it spoken about and to cause it to speak through explicit articulation and endlessly accumulated detail. (HS 18)

Foucault refers to the major centres in the nineteenth century that produced discourses on sexuality - medicine, psychiatry and the law being three of these.[3] Through these discourses a norm of sexuality was established, a norm against which all forms of sexual behaviour were defined and categorised:

> Through the various discourses, legal sanctions against minor perversions were multiplied; sexual irregularity was annexed to mental illness; from childhood to old age, a norm of sexual development was defined and all the possible deviations were carefully described; pedagogical controls and medical treatments were organised; around the least fantasies, moralists, but especially doctors, brandished the whole emphatic vocabulary of abomination. (HS 86)

The result of this transformation of sex into discourse, according to Foucault, was the initiation of sexual heterogeneities. The sexual status of the legitimately married couple, which prior to the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries had been under constant surveillance, was now given a measure of privacy, tending to function as a norm against which all other forms of sexuality were measured and categorised.

> On the other hand, what came under scrutiny was the sexuality of children, mad men and women, and criminals; the sensuality of those who did not like the opposite sex; reveries, obsessions, petty manias, or great transports of rage. It was a time for all these figures, scarcely noticed in the past, to step forward and speak, to make the difficult confession of what they were. No doubt they were condemned all the same; but they were listened to; and if regular sexuality happened to be questioned once again, it was through a reflux movement, originating in these peripheral sexualities. (HS 38-39)

It remains to be asked why this deployment of sexuality occurred in the nineteenth century. Foucault, in fact, argues that its beginnings were seen in the eighteenth century and that they merely came to fruition in the nineteenth; and he sees this as having firm links with the creation of class hegemony. In the nineteenth century the middle classes emerged as a powerful economic and political

force. What they lacked, however, was a coherent class identity and it was this that they sought through the formation of new codes relating to sexual and moral issues.

In Myths of Sexuality Lynda Nead uses Foucault's History of Sexuality as the theoretical framework for her study of women in the visual culture of the Victorian period. The basis of her study is found in the proposition that art can be seen as a historical discourse and, as such, has a part in "the production and reproduction of power and domination"(4). Nead states that art is much more than the "ideological expression of a formed economic structure" (8) and has to be understood as part of the hegemonic process. As a discourse it has to be seen as contributing to the production of definitions and meanings surrounding the subject of sexuality that Foucault speaks of in The History of Sexuality.

If art can be seen as a historical discourse then so, too, can literature. My thesis involves seeing literature as a historical discourse and, therefore, as having a role in the categoris*f*ation of normal and deviant forms of sexuality. In other words, literature can be seen as having a part in the formation of social reality as opposed to being merely a reflection of it.[4]

My overall intention in this thesis, therefore, is to examine sexuality in David Copperfield with the aim of showing how complicit it is with the general discourse on sexuality as outlined by Foucault in The History of Sexuality (Vol. 1).

Endnotes

[1] It is tempting to ask what a "normal" sexual relationship is. It is probably true to say that different critics would have different answers. The important point to note, however, is that the word "normal" is used. There is a "norm" against which most people measure sexuality/relationships. Dickens has been seen, by many, not to provide representations of this "norm".

[2] See, also, Steven Marcus, The Other Victorians.

[3] Dickens can be shown to appropriate medical and legal discourse, in particular, in his fiction, this fiction including, of course, David Copperfield.

[4] It should be noted that in The History of Sexuality Foucault does not refer specifically to literature as being "discourse". He does, however, make specific mention of pieces of literature from the period; most notably, perhaps, the great sexual confession of the century, the anonymously authored "My Secret Life". In The Novel and the Police D.A. Miller quotes Foucault on the subject of literature. He states: "As Foucault once put it in an interview with Roger-Pol Droit (published posthumously in Le Monde, September 6, 1975, p. 12), "On every occasion I made literature the object of a report, not of an analysis and not of a reduction to, or integration into, the very field of analysis." (Miller, viii)

What is David Copperfield?

Some explanation is due as to why I have selected Dickens' David Copperfield as the basis of this thesis. There are, in fact, several reasons, the first of which is that it was a personal favourite of Dickens; in his Preface to the Charles Dickens Edition of the novel (1869) he refers to this novel and, presumably, its protagonist, as "his favourite child". The novel has always attracted critics to it for this reason, in part because it is considered that it contains more of Dickens than any of his other works. It was in this work that he chose to place his autobiographical fragment and the extent to which the rest of the novel is veiled autobiography has always been questioned.

The second reason for selecting this novel is that it is less concerned with social issues than many of Dickens' other works, at least on the surface. Its subject-matter is, instead, highly domestic; its primary concern with personal relationships. In addition, the novel was written during a period when Dickens appeared particularly interested in the situation of women. Michael Slater writes:

> Dickens not only brings more women onto his stage in the middle five novels, however; three of the five centre on a heroine rather than a hero and in the case of one of the exceptions, Copperfield, a whole series of major female characters plays a dominant role in the story's development. Many of the central concerns of these books, moreover, relate to dangers, frustrations and humiliations experienced by women in the male-oriented world of Victorian England. (Slater 243)

While refraining from commenting on Michael Slater's opinion regarding the "central concerns" of this novel I must agree with his assertion that the female characters in this novel play an extremely dominant role and one that, in any study relating to sexual matters, cannot be ignored.[1]

However, perhaps the most important reason for choosing David Copperfield is the fact that it is numbered among Dickens' three autobiographical fictions. Ostensibly David Copperfield himself is responsible for this work. A middle-aged writer, he sets out to record his life, the only purpose for this being, we at first

assume, to determine "Whether I shall turn out to be the hero of my own life, or whether that station will be held by anyone else" (49).[2]

Throughout The History of Sexuality Foucault argues the importance of confession as a mechanism for transforming sex into discourse. He refers to the evolution of Catholic pastoral practice and the sacrament of Penance after the Council of Trent. With the Counter Reformation the importance of regular confession was stressed and increasing importance was attributed to "all the insinuations of the flesh" (HS 19):

> According to the new pastoral, sex must not be named imprudently, but its aspects, its correlations, and its effects must be pursued down to their slenderest ramifications . . . everything had to be told . . . "Examine diligently, therefore, all the faculties of your soul: memory, understanding and will. Examine with precision all your senses as well . . . Examine, moreover, all your thoughts, every word you speak, and all your actions. Examine even unto your dreams, to know if, once awakened, you did not give them your consent. And finally, do not think that in so sensitive and perilous a matter as this, there is anything trivial or insignificant." (HS 19-20)

Foucault goes on to state that "One could plot a line going straight from the seventeenth-century pastoral to what became its projection in literature, "scandalous" literature at that" (HS 21):

> Sade takes up the injunction in words that seem to have been retranscribed from the treatises of spiritual direction: "Your narrations must be decorated with the most numerous and searching details; the precise way and extent to which we may judge how the passion you describe relates to human manners and man's character is determined by your willingness to disguise no circumstance." (HS 21)

While Foucault appears to confine his comments to "scandalous" literature there is a strong implication that he is not *only* referring to literature of a scandalous nature. Certainly, David Copperfield bears out the truth in this. Throughout the novel David stresses the completeness of his account:

> I search my breast, and I commit its secrets, if I know them, without any reservation to this paper. (713)

> In fulfilment of the compact I have made with myself, to reflect my mind on this paper, I again examine it, closely, and bring its secrets to the light. (765)
>
> I have made it, thus far, with no purpose of suppressing any of my thoughts; for, as I have elsewhere said, this narrative is my written memory. (889)

There was, of course, nothing "scandalous" about this novel when it was released, nor was it a sexual confession. However, David's intentions are shown to be virtually identical to those of one particularly scandalous piece of literature from the nineteenth century. Foucault states:

> And again at the end of the nineteenth century, the anonymous author of My Secret Life submitted to the same prescription . . . "I recount the facts, just as they happened, insofar as I am able to recollect them; this is all that I can do"; "a secret life must not leave out anything; there is nothing to be ashamed of . . . one can never know too much concerning human nature." (HS 22)[3]

And, again, while David Copperfield is not an account of David's *secret* life, there is no doubt that in it he divulges many secrets; his own and those of other people:

> When I awoke in the morning I thought very much of little Em'ly, and her emotion last night . . . I felt as if I had come into the knowledge of those domestic weaknesses and tendernesses in a sacred confidence, and that to disclose them, even to Steerforth, would be wrong . . . The repetition to any ears - even to Steerforth's - of what she had been unable to repress when her heart lay open to me by accident, I felt would be a rough deed, unworthy of the light of our pure childhood, which I always saw encircling her head. I made a resolution, therefore, to keep it in my own breast; and there it gave her image a new grace. (DC 401)

While David goes to great lengths to point out his integrity it surely must come into question when one considers that he is prepared to disclose the details of other's lives to his reading public! However, if we are to believe the title this work was "never meant to be published on any account" and hence we must accept that this work was written for his own benefit and not for the amusement or edification of any readership.

But if David Copperfield was published, and it was always intended that it should be, why did Dickens append this apparent afterthought to the title of this

work? Presumably, it is precisely because he wants us to believe in what we are reading. This is confession and it is generally assumed that a confession is an honest account simply because of what is often its private nature.[4] This is true whether it is undergone because of religious imperatives or simply as an outpouring in a diary. In his appendix to the title of this novel Dickens is stressing this and, in doing so, is attempting to manipulate his readership. We must believe in the truth of this fiction.

But, how truthful is this fiction? If we approach the novel as being the autobiography of David Copperfield then we must accept that the events that he records are a form of the truth relating to his life. However, they are controlled and ordered and are not necessarily remembered or told accurately. Memory becomes clouded as it can with any autobiography. Life cannot be controlled in the way that the written word can. In "Stranger than Truth: Fictional Autobiography and Autobiographical Fiction" Robert Tracy explores this idea in some detail:

> The writer of autobiography uses the techniques of prose fiction, and imposes upon the confusing crosscurrents of a life a discernible pattern- a life is made sense of. There is, to be sure, a relationship between the life described in the autobiography and the life that the subject of it actually lived, but it is often an uneasy relationship, for life is less tidy than literature. By imposing a theme upon his life, the autobiographer applies the disciplines of imaginative literature rather than those of absolute historical veracity. He can be the subject of the book, but when necessary he can separate that subject - his protagonist - from his own living, breathing, suffering, and potentially embarrassing self, can withdraw and watch his protagonist follow the pattern of a written destiny. (Tracy 275-276))

In his discussion of autobiographical fiction Tracy says much about the nature of David Copperfield. He points out that David himself recognises that "fiction transforms, exaggerates, that the fiction-maker's mind is continually tempted away from literal truth" (Tracy 280). He also points out, quite rightly, that David himself plants the seeds of doubt in our minds; we must question the reliability of his autobiography. Tracy, as many have done before him, refers to the following passage in the novel to illustrate this fact:

> I set down this remembrance here because it is an instance to myself of the manner in which I fitted my old books to my altered life, and made stories for myself, out of the streets, and out of men and women: and how some main points in the character I shall unconsciously develop, I suppose, in writing my life, were gradually forming all this while . . . When my thoughts go back, now, to that slow agony of my youth, I wonder how much of the histories I invented for such people hangs like a mist of fancy over well-remembered facts! When I tread the old ground, I do not wonder that I seem to see and pity, going on before me, an innocent romantic boy, making his imaginative world out of strange experiences and sordid things! (224-225)

This is only one example of the many instances in which David questions his own ability to record the events of his life faithfully; and it is not only because of the cloud that hangs over his memory. There is little doubt that David, like anyone writing the story of his life, remembers and records only those events that he wishes to record, and that those events that are recorded are shaped not only by his imaginings but by his ideals and his fantasies about the life that he would have liked to have lived. Any autobiography, in this sense, can be viewed as a construct and this novel is no exception. It is, in fact, a construct that works on several levels. Dickens is, obviously, the grand constructor but it is the construct of David Copperfield in which I am interested in the first instance. David is constructing a particular view of his life and the society in which he lived.

So, who is David Copperfield and what is the best way of approaching his construct? I believe that the key to an understanding of the work is found in the title: "The Personal History, Adventures, Experience and Observation of David Copperfield of Blunderstone Rookery". The novel can, in effect, be divided into two distinct parts; that relating to David's personal history, experiences and adventures and that relating to his observation, and subsequent categorisation, of others.

David Copperfield, likewise, can be divided into two parts; David the writer and observer and David the character. The majority of criticism relating to this novel has centred on David the character; on an analysis of the novel as *Bildungsroman.* I will be viewing David more as observer and writer - as the

constructor of his and other people's lives. His position as such will be the subject of the next chapter.

Endnotes

[1] A matter that, perhaps, should be addressed is my reason for choosing only one novel. Quite simply, my intention was always to do a close reading of Dickens as opposed to a generalised study. I should add that I am, in no way, suggesting that what I find in this novel will necessarily be representative of his other novels. I "leave them to themselves".

[2] Unless otherwise indicated, all unabbreviated references refer to David Copperfield.

[3] It should be noted, perhaps, that My Secret Life is generally considered to incorporate a considerable amount of fantasy.

[4] Dickens considered incorporating the word "confession" in the title of this novel - see working notes - trial titles - eg: "The Last Living Speech and Confession of David Copperfield Junior of Blunderstone Lodge . . . Found among his Papers."

Who is David Copperfield?

And now my written story ends. I look back, once more - for the last time - before I close these leaves. I see myself, with Agnes at my side, journeying along the road of life. I see our children and our friends around us; and I hear the roar of many voices, not indifferent to me as I travel on.

David Copperfield.

Beginning an analysis of this novel with an examination of David the writer brings the nature of the narrative itself into sharp focus. It is relatively easy to approach the novel as if the events within it were literally unfolding before our eyes. In reality, however, they have already unfolded and are now simply being retold. Likewise, if David is indeed constructing a particular view it is important not to subscribe slavishly to the chronological framework that he presents us with in order to examine his narrative; for this would be, in effect, an endorsement of his construct.

Once we step outside the framework of the narrative that David himself presents us with it becomes abundantly clear that David the writer is very far removed from the forlorn orphan who has been concentrated on in so much of the criticism relating to this novel. The David Copperfield who exists in this work is never, in reality, a small boy at Blunderstone. He is not the young and inexperienced husband of Dora; nor is he a struggling and impoverished artist. Rather, David Copperfield is a respected and respectable member of the middle class. He is a successful writer with an adoring and perfect wife.

This account of his life can, therefore, be viewed not only as a confession - as a means of understanding and perhaps atoning for the past - but also as a means of justification, a vehicle for reinforcing the rightness of his position in society and his domestic relationship. In order to discuss the implications of this, however, and the mechanisms which David employs for his purposes, it is necessary to have some understanding of the general domestic ideology of the nineteenth century, an ideology that developed through the need of the growing middle class to forge a coherent identity for itself. Lynda Nead writes:

> It is inaccurate to imagine the Victorian middle class as a single or unified entity. The middle class was composed of a diverse range of occupational groups and levels of income; what was important, therefore, was the creation of a coherent and distinct class identity which would set the middle class apart from the social and economic classes above and below it. In many ways, this class

> coherence was established through shared notions of morality and respectability. (Nead 5)

A key element in the evolution of a dominant domestic ideology was the separation of the domestic from the business environment. Businessmen moved their residences out of the city, changing both the nature of the urban population and the nature of the domestic environment. The city was now regarded by the suburban population as being a "dangerous and threatening place in which a population of working-class and casual poor could easily turn into a riotous mob" (Nead 32). The home, at the same time, took on great significance, being regarded both as "an index of material success and social position" (Nead 32) and a refuge from the unknown and threatening outside world. It is best summed up by John Ruskin:

> This is the true nature of home - it is the place of Peace; the shelter, not only from all injury, but from all terror, doubt and division. In so far as it is not this it is not home; so far as the anxieties of the outer life penetrate into it, and the inconsistently-minded, unknown, unloved, or hostile society of the outer world is allowed by either husband or wife to cross the threshold, it ceases to be home; it is then only a part of that outer world which you have roofed over and lighted fire in. But so far as it is a sacred place, a vestal temple, a temple of the hearth watched over by Household Gods, before whose faces none may come but those whom they can receive with love . . . so far it vindicates the name and fulfills the praise of home. (118-119)[1]

The Victorian home was consistently characterised by notions of peace and domestic tranquillity and was seen as being suffused with warmth and light. This was the ideal domestic setting in which the middle class family could live and raise their children. In Foucauldian terms this was the setting in which sexuality was allowed, even encouraged. It was the heterosexual couple living out this domestic ideal who were regarded as exhibiting a regularised, acceptable and respectable sexuality. It was they who functioned as a norm against which all others and their sexuality were "measured and categorised".

An obviously vital participant in this domestic ideal was woman in her role as wife and mother; her presence was required for its success as, indeed, for its very

existence. The separation of the home and business spheres had resulted in the formation of new gender identities and divisions; home was now regarded as woman's true domain. This was her rightful and natural place, just as her husband's rightful and natural place was in the world of politics and business. It should be noted, however, that despite her dependent status the nineteenth century woman was in no way considered to be inferior to her husband. As Nead states: "The underlying principle of gender division in the nineteenth century was that the sexes were different and complementary" (34). This point is, again, best illustrated by Ruskin:

> Each has what the other has not: each completes the other, and is completed by the other. They are in nothing alike, and the happiness and perfection of both depends on each asking and receiving from the other what the other only can give . . .
>
> Now their separate characters are briefly these. The man's power is active, progressive, defensive. He is eminently the doer, the creator, the discoverer and defender. His intellect is for speculation and invention, his energy for adventure, for war and for conquest . . . But the woman's power is not for rule, not for battle - and her intellect is not for invention or creation, but for sweet ordering, arrangement and decision . . . Her great function is praise. (7)

Yet, despite Ruskin's assertion that the woman's power is not for "rule" much of what he writes contradicts this view. For despite her complete dependency and the fact that she was supposedly sheltered from the real world her responsibilities were incredibly onerous, to say nothing of the personal qualities that she was expected to possess in order to fulfil her rightful duties:

> But do you not see that to fulfil this, she must - as far as one can use such terms of a human creature - be incapable of error? So far as she rules, all must be right, or nothing is. She must be enduringly, incorruptedly good; instinctively, infallibly wise - wise, not for self-development, but for self-renunciation: wise, not that she may set herself above her husband, but that she may never fail from his side: wise, not with the narrowness of insolent and loving pride, but with the passionate gentleness of an infinitely variable, because infinitely applicable, modesty of service - the true changefulness of woman. (119-120)

Woman's power, therefore, was considered to be very real; her rule in the home, absolute. It was seen as the responsibility of woman to ensure that all was right in the domestic sphere and, because of her "protected" status, she was expected to make no error. Domestic happiness appears to have been very much dependent on the woman in any relationship:

> The man, in his rough work, in open world, must encounter all peril and trial:- to him, therefore, the failure, the offence, the inevitable error: often he must be wounded, or subdued, often misled and always hardened. But he guards the woman from all this; within his house, as ruled by her, unless she herself has sought it, need enter no danger, no temptation, no cause of error or offence. (Ruskin 7)

It is evidence of the existence of this domestic ideal, this acceptable setting for sexuality, that one would perhaps expect to find in a popular novel of the nineteenth century that deals, to such a great extent, with domestic matters, particularly since Dickens is "often remembered as the supreme expositor of the Victorian domestic idyll" (Barickman 61). Yet despite the fact that he extolled the virtues of home in his non-fictional writings it is relatively hard to find representations of the domestic ideal in Dickens' novels. Nor is David Copperfield an exception to this rule. Among its major characters, and in its main narrative, there is only one complete family to be found - that is, if we are to define a family as consisting of a father, a mother and their offspring - and it is impossible to regard the Micawbers as either representing an ideal or a norm against which the other characters are measured and categorised. Their complete lack of success at managing their business and personal life precludes them from achieving the peace and harmony that makes up the ideal. No-one in the novel is expected to model themselves on the Micawbers.

The first real indication of anything approaching a domestic ideal is, in fact, towards the end of the novel when Traddles talks to David about his marriage and the virtues of Sophy, "the dearest girl in the world":

> "My dear Copperfield," returned Traddles, "she is, without exception, the dearest girl! The way she manages this place; her punctuality, domestic knowledge, economy, and order; her

> cheerfulness, Copperfield! . . . I am sure that we are two of the happiest people . . . I admit that, at all events. Bless my soul, when I see her getting up by candle-light on these dark mornings, busying herself in the day's arrangements, going out to market before the clerks come into the Inn, caring for no weather, devising the most capital little dinners out of the plainest materials, making puddings, and pies, keeping everything in its right place, always so neat and ornamental herself, sitting up at night with me if it's ever so late, sweet-tempered and encouraging always, and all for me, I positively sometimes can't believe it, Copperfield!" (919)

The qualities that Traddles' Sophy is endowed with are the very qualities which the ideal Victorian woman brought to the home. There is no doubt that Sophy is "enduringly, incorruptedly good" or that her intellect is used for "sweet ordering, arrangement and decision"; there is no doubt that "so far as she rules, all is right". Traddles' comments regarding their great happiness reinforce the argument that domestic happiness was to be achieved through the domestic and practical skills of the woman in the relationship. Sophy may be "neat and ornamental" but this virtue is a secondary one. We know that she is not the beauty of her family. Sexuality may belong in the home but even there it has its place; Sophy has "household", not bedroom eyes (900).

The only thing required to make Traddles' and Sophy's domestic situation perfect is a family and this has arrived in the form of two sons in the novel's last "retrospect". Sophy and Traddles thus truly represent Dickens' domestic ideal and the setting in which the sexual norm in the novel exists; the existence of children is both proof of and reinforcement for this norm.

For David, this ideal is not achieved until after the novel's close, when we are told of his personal success and his domestic happiness: "I had advanced in fame and fortune, my domestic joy was perfect, I had been married ten happy years. Agnes and I were sitting by the fire one night in Spring, and three of our children were playing in the room . . . " (939). This short descriptive passage and its accompanying illustration go one step further than anything supplied by the author in relation to Sophy and Traddles by summing up in the briefest of terms middle-

class aspirations of the time. The acknowledgement of the separate spheres is outlined very clearly in David's comments; he had "advanced in fame and fortune" and his "domestic joy was perfect"; due in part to his success in managing his business affairs and in part to his acquisition of a perfect wife and helpmate.[2] Nothing is amiss in this domestic circle, within which David and Agnes and their children are enshrined. Their home is suffused by warmth and light, symbolised by the presence of a glowing fire. In short, nothing could be closer to the "fireside peace and happiness" that Dickens had always extolled in his writings, fictional and otherwise.

And so we return to David the writer who, it is vital to remember, narrates this novel from this position of enshrinement in the domestic ideal. This is not a novel that merely recounts the relationships and milestones in David Copperfield's life. Rather, it is David Copperfield's account of the relationships and milestones in his life and, as such, it has to be regarded as subjective. Everything which he relates has to be seen as having been influenced by the events in his life and by his position at the time of rendering the account.

In what specific ways, therefore, can David Copperfield the writer be shown to reinforce the domestic ideal which he has achieved and the position of sexuality within it? The answer is by presenting examples of domestic situations in which this ideal does *not* exist. The little that we are told of the marriages of Sophy and Traddles and David and Agnes goes a long way towards indicating what we can expect to find preceding them in the novel. If what we see in these two marriages is the ideal then we can assume that what we are presented with earlier in terms of male/female relationships, at least, is other than the ideal. Similarly, if these relationships serve as examples of the norm for respectable sexuality, then what precedes them in terms of sexuality can be considered to be other than the norm, or that by which we *define* the sexual norm.

Despite the fact that the domestic ideal is postponed for the novel's protagonist until after the novel's close, David Copperfield does not lack domestic settings. While David has several very bleak episodes in his life he is only truly alone while on his trek to find Aunt Betsey. At all other times there are families to give him love and protection. Most of the characters in the novel, in fact, enjoy some form of family life; however, the type of family life presented in this novel conforms to a pattern seen throughout Dickens' works:

> The typical family is inadequate at best, vicious at worst, and the figure who absolutely haunts his fiction is the abandoned, orphaned or abused child. Almost no family group includes both an adequate mother and father. Potentially loving parents have died or disappeared . . . Or a vicious parent frustrates the loving efforts of foster parents . . . In these novels, in fact, the presumptive norm of loving father and mother is almost non-existent. Even a minimally nurturing family is an ideal to be struggled for, not a given. And always the happy family that does succeed in loving and protecting the child provides only a temporary refuge and almost no strength to combat the forces that assail the child's basic sense of self. (Barickman 62-63)

The family at Yarmouth is a good example of the type of family that we find in David Copperfield. It is close and loving but it is not a nuclear family. Dan Peggotty, the head of the family, is a bachelor and childless. He has in his care, however, his orphan niece and nephew. Emily and Ham are the children of his sister and brother respectively. The other occupant of the household is Mrs Gummidge, his dead partner's widow. She, too, is childless.

What we find in the Peggotty household we find, to a lesser or greater extent, in almost every family in the novel, though often without the loving fellowship. The majority of children are lacking at least one parent. David's father has died before his birth and he loses his mother at a very young age. Traddles, too, is orphaned, as are Martha Endell, Rosa Dartle and the Micawbers' servant-girl, the "Orfling". Even David's mother, we hear, was orphaned at a young age.

In addition, there are a number of children in the novel who have lost one parent. Dora Spenlow is motherless but later achieves full orphan status with the

death of her father. Agnes Wickfield and Julia Mills are also motherless as is, presumably, Minnie Omer, while Annie Strong, Steerforth and Uriah Heep have all lost their fathers.

In Dickens and the Parent-Child Relationship Arthur Adrian notes that orphans and demi-orphans occupy prominent positions in nearly all of Dickens' novels after Oliver Twist but that David Copperfield contains the "largest cluster" (80). He believes that this indicates "Dickens' obsession with the theme of the homeless child cast adrift in an alien world" (80) and that Dickens also wished to emphasise the role of the surrogate parent.

Much could be made of this first point but not in relation to David Copperfield, where we do not see much of children "cast adrift". None of the orphans in the novel are homeless, with the exception of Martha Endell. Traddles is cared for by an uncle. Rosa Dartle has been taken in by the Steerforths and the "Orfling" has been taken in by the Micawbers. David, after a long search, finds a loving and supportive "family" in Aunt Betsey and Mr Dick.

Adrian's surrogate parent theme is, indeed, therefore, a strong one, the relationship between surrogate parent and child being explored extensively through the relationships of Dan and Emily and Aunt Betsey and David in particular. However, Dickens could have explored the theme adequately and, perhaps, more effectively, by refraining from eliminating everyone's families. A little contrast, after all, does wonders. Why, then, are so many of Dickens' real parents killed off? Setting biographical explanations aside one possibility in terms of the novel is that it is because they have indulged in sexual intercourse. Evidence can be found to support this charge in the fact that both Clara Copperfield and Dora appear to die because of illnesses directly related to the bearing of children: Clara Copperfield after giving birth to her second child and Dora following a miscarriage. It is also significant that many of the surviving adults in the novel are childless. Dr and Annie Strong, for example, are one of the few couples in the novel. As there is no

reason to suppose that Annie is not a perfectly healthy and fertile young woman we must, surely, ask why she has not had any children. Is it because she and her husband do not have a sexual relationship?

It is relevant to ask this type of question because there is no doubt at all that in this novel Dickens not only succeeds in eliminating parents but, in doing so, eliminates all possibility of a respectable sexual existence for the majority of his characters. He has, however, created a protagonist and, more importantly, a narrator who has achieved this respectable sexual existence and who thus has the power to redefine his position in society through observing and categorising others. David is given the power to construct his own life through observing the lives of others who, unlike himself, do not have the privilege of privacy.

A picture of David the writer is, at this point, beginning to emerge. David Copperfield, as the author of this fiction, has a great deal more power than the homeless boy who goes to seek his fortune in Dover. He has the power to construct the lives and fortunes of those about whom he writes. He has the power to categorise, to marginalise and to punish. And nothing is hidden from his gaze. He has the power of sight.

Endnotes

[1] Sesame and Lilies was, of course, published many years after David Copperfield but this point in itself must strengthen the argument that literature could generally be regarded as helping to *form* social reality rather than being a mere reflection of it. In David Copperfield, at least, Dickens certainly pre-empts much of the comment of John Ruskin and perhaps can, therefore, be regarded as having had his place in developing opinion relating to gender identities and moral and domestic codes.

[2] It should be noted that while David acknowledges the existence of the "separate sheres" his work environment is not separated from his domestic environment. Both he and Traddles work at home.

"I Observe"

To a great extent I will be concentrating in this thesis on the "observation" of David Copperfield. As previously discussed the novel can essentially be divided into two sections; stated simply these relate to David's observation of others and his observation of himself. There is no doubt, too, that the reader is invited to become an observer; in being allowed access to this extremely personal account we are placed, more or less, in the position of voyeurs. When we are informed that this is the "observation of David Copperfield" we know that we will be reading an account of his observations but, perhaps, this very ambiguous title also refers to our observation of the "author".

However we interpret the title there is no doubt that surveillance is an important notion in this novel. David is surveying himself and others and this, in effect, can be seen as the beginning of the process of categorisation and marginalisation. The novel, in many ways, concentrates more on David's surveillance of others. The illustrations attest to this fact; in the majority of them David is either shown to be on the periphery of the action looking in on the characters as they act and re-act on a small stage or is in a central position, often sitting on a chair, watching. Often one gets the impression of David as stage-manager of a small drama or, to be more precise, stage manager of a variety of small dramas. It should be noted, too, that even when David is not present to observe or survey in person there are usually "spies" available to survey for him.[1] David has an all-seeing eye, or so we are led to believe.

An appropriate metaphor to employ for the purposes of illustrating the extent of David's surveillance, and consequently his power, is the Panopticon, a Benthamite prison plan that never existed in any concrete form but which came to represent an ideal in terms of surveillance mechanisms and disciplinary structures. The Panopticon has been discussed at length in Foucault's Discipline and Punish, a work that examines the role of the prison in western society and the modes of power and new disciplinary technologies indicated by the birth of the "modern"

prison in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The image of the Panopticon has been used in previous studies of Dickens' work, most notably in examinations of notions of surveillance and discipline in Great Expectations and Hard Times.[2]

The Panopticon consists of a circular structure with a tower at its centre, the windows of which give visual access to the cells on the periphery of the structure. Through the careful placing of windows and the resultant effect of backlighting the supervisor in the central tower is afforded unimpeded visual access to each of the cells and its individual inhabitant. Foucault thus describes the cells as being"like so many cages, so many small theatres, in which each actor is alone, perfectly individualised and constantly visible" (DP 200). He goes on to describe the ultimate function of this structure:

> The panoptic mechanism arranges spatial unities that make it possible to see constantly and to recognise immediately. In short, it reverses the principle of the dungeon; or rather of its three functions - to enclose, to deprive of light and to hide - it preserves the first and eliminates the other two. Full lighting and the eye of a supervisor capture better than darkness, which ultimately protected. Visibility is a trap. (DP 200)

It should be noted that while Bentham's plan for the Panopticon was as a prison, as an architectural structure its usefulness had no bounds. This design represented not only new ideals in terms of the control, surveillance and punishment of criminals but also represented new ideals in terms of the control of a whole society:

> The Panopticon must not be understood as a dream building: it is the diagram of a mechanism of power reduced to its ideal form; its functioning . . . can be implemented in hospitals, workshops, schools, prisons. (DP 205)

It is surely no coincidence that attitudes regarding the control of the sexuality of a society changed at much the same time as changes in attitudes towards the treatment of criminality. The reason that the metaphor of the Panopticon is so useful for a reading of David Copperfield is simply because the narrative's structure and, I will argue, its aims reflect the aims exemplified by this one architectural plan.

Matters of sexuality in the nineteenth century were literally brought out of hiding and into the light, the object of this exposure being, primarily, to examine, categorise and, ultimately, to control.

I can take my point that the structure of David Copperfield reflects the aims exemplified by the Panoptic mechanism one step further by showing that it is possible literally to superimpose the Panoptic mechanism onto this novel. David's role of surveyor has already been mentioned and it is because of this role that he is eminently suited to the role of supervisor of what is, essentially, his own Panopticon. The fact that he is not always present to survey in person but at times uses others to do his observing for him is important in that it indicates the extent of his vision. It is significant, too, that he is able to step outside the role of supervisor with some ease, one of the great advantages of the Panoptic mechanism being that it does not matter *who* is observing; it is, rather, the knowledge of those being held "captive" that they are always *being* observed. Foucault writes:

> The Panopticon is a machine for disassociating the see/being seen dyad: in the peripheric ring, one is totally seen, without ever seeing; in the central tower, one sees everything without ever being seen . . . Consequently, it does not matter who exercises power. Any individual, taken almost at random, can operate the machine: in the absence of the director, his family, his friends, his visitors, even his servants. Similarly, it does not matter what motive animates him: the curiosity of the indiscreet, the malice of a child, the thirst for knowledge of a philosopher who wishes to visit this museum of human nature, or the perversity of those who take pleasure in spying and punishing. The more numerous those anonymous and temporary observers are, the greater the risk for the inmate of being surprised and the greater his anxious awareness of being observed. (DP 202)

By divorcing oneself from a linear reading of the novel, a reading that necessarily involves following the thread of David's progress, it is possible to see that the novel itself can be divided into spheres of action or "cells"; not, of course, cells that contain individuals but cells that contain the domestic groups that David weaves his way through, each of which plays out its own small drama before him. These "cells" have, too, one thing in common, apart from the fact that David is

involved, directly or indirectly, with each of them; the fact that they are generally self-contained. For, while David moves with ease through a number of relationships, domestic groups, classes and geographic locations this can not be said of the people about whom he writes. Their characters, appear, to a great extent, to be dictated by their respective classes and by the geographic locations in which they reside. Their relationships, too, are dictated by these factors. For while with them there is movement between the various geographic locations presented in the novel it is minimal if one compares it to David's movement. For this reason, I will examine this novel by dividing it into cells that correspond to the major geographic locations presented. Each of these geographic locations represents a particular experience or multiple experiences or relationships in David's life but each can be shown, through the domestic groups which it contains, to represent something in its own right. Combined, these locations make up the world of this novel. At the novel's centre is David: looking round, looking out, looking back. He is the supervisor of this "construction"; his is the Panoptic vision.

A final question to ask relates to where Dickens stands in relation to David. He is, of course, the master-creator, the architect of this panoptic structure. There is no doubt, however, that he transfers responsibility for the overseeing of this structure to David. While his presence is felt throughout the narrative and cannot be entirely eliminated, it is David who has responsibility for recording all that he surveys. The next section of this paper will deal specifically with his record.

[1] For example, the Omers, who keep him up to date with happenings in Yarmouth, and Mr Chillip, who has his finger on the pulse of Blunderstone and its most infamous resident, Mr Murdstone.

[2] See, specifically, Cynthia Northcutt Malone's "The Fixed Eye and the Rolling Eye: Surveillance and Discipline in Hard Times" and Jeremy Tambling's "Prison-bound: Dickens and Foucault".

SECTION TWO

Blunderstone

Blunderstone Rookery is the first domestic cell in the novel to which we are introduced and is also the first in which we are presented with an examination of peripheral sexualities. It is an important setting due to the fact that it can be regarded as representing David's childhood but has to be seen as doubly important because it is the place that the adult David Copperfield appears to identify with most strongly. As a middle-aged writer David is a resident of Highgate, but he entitles his narrative "David Copperfield of Blunderstone Rookery". David Copperfield is, we initially assume, a man who cannot easily forget his roots.

The section of the novel that revolves around Blunderstone Rookery is often held to be the most "honest" in the novel. Critics have applauded Dickens' achievement in climbing into a child's mind and showing the development with such insight and truth. At this early point in the novel we are informed in no uncertain terms that this is an honest account and are left in no doubt as to David's role in it. This is to relate his own experiences but also his observations of those who were a part of, and influenced, his life:

> I think the memory of most of us can go farther back into such times than many of us suppose; just as I believe the power of observation in numbers of very young children to be quite wonderful for its closeness and accuracy. Indeed, I think that most grown men who are remarkable in this respect, may with greater propriety be said not to have lost the faculty, than to have acquired it; the rather, as I generally observe such men to retain a certain frankness, and gentleness, and capacity of being pleased, which are also an inheritance they have preserved from their childhood.
>
> I might have a misgiving that I am 'meandering' in stopping to say this, but that it brings me back to remark that I build these conclusions, in part upon my own experience of myself; and if it should appear from anything I may set down in this narrative that I was a child of close observation, or that as a man I have a strong memory of my childhood, I undoubtedly lay claim to both of these characteristics. (61)

In a sense, this novel begins before its literal beginning. David's life is already being shaped before he even comes into the world. His account, at least, begins before this point for David does not appear in the novel until the second

chapter; significantly titled, "I observe". In chapter one of the novel we are presented with what could be termed David's "sexual legacy" through a discussion between Aunt Betsey and David's mother in which their respective pasts and characters are revealed. This "legacy" must be seen to be important because it is out of it that David the writer and observer emerges. It should also be regarded as important simply because it is there; and if David's observations begin in earnest in the second chapter of the novel then in the first we, as readers, are invited to observe.

Aunt Betsey, we are told, is the victim of a failed marriage; for her there has been no domestic ideal. Specific details of her relationship with her husband are not provided at this stage although we do know that he had been younger than she and that he was very handsome, "except in the sense of the homely adage, 'handsome is that handsome does'" (51). Aunt Betsey's husband was rumoured to be violent, a characteristic that apparently led to their separation.

Through Aunt Betsey's questioning of Mrs Copperfield regarding David's father we learn about her own situation. We are told that she did not approve of the Copperfield marriage because she believed Mrs Copperfield to be a "wax doll" (51). Mr Copperfield had been twice her age and Aunt Betsey expresses her concern that Mr and Mrs Copperfield were not "comfortable together".[1] She asks whether Mr Copperfield was good to her, whether they knew anything about keeping house and whether he left her well-provided for. All these questions show that Aunt Betsey's sympathies lie with Mrs Copperfield. She obviously senses a parallel with her own situation where, in fact, it does not exist, at least to our knowledge. Even so, however, the reality of the woman as a victim of the male sex is firmly established here.[2]

Later, Aunt Betsey fills in the sketchy details of her marriage:

> "Betsey Trotwood don't look a likely subject for the tender passion . . . but the time was, Trot, when she believed in that man most entirely. When she loved him, Trot, right well. When

> there was no proof of attachment and affection that she would not have given him. He repaid her by breaking her fortune, and nearly breaking her heart. So she put all that sort of sentiment, once and forever, in a grave, and filled it up, and flattened it down." (757)

Her hopes for her god-daughter are that she will not make the same mistakes as she herself made:

> "There must be no mistakes in life with this Betsey Trotwood. There must be no trifling with her affections, poor dear. She must be well brought up, and well guarded from reposing any foolish confidences where they are not deserved. I must make that my care." (55)

What Betsey receives later in the novel, of course, is not a god-daughter but a god-son and hence finds herself educating a boy rather than a girl. Aunt Betsey must teach David not to trifle with a woman's affections and not to be undeserving of any confidences that any woman may place in him. If we add to this the fact that she will not want David to make the same mistakes as his father made - ie, in marrying a "wax doll" with no housekeeping skills, a woman with whom he is not equally matched - we get a picture of what Dickens wants for his hero. The ideal becomes visible.

Aunt Betsey's opportunity to mould the character and the future of David does not, of course, come until later in the novel. In his early childhood it is Peggotty and his mother whom he must look to for emotional guidance. It is through his observations of them and his early observations of the world made from the security of this home that he begins to develop his adult vision of the world.

Since David is a posthumous child, his early experiences of family life do not include a loving father. He does not, however, mourn the loss of the father he never knew but, rather, pities him his place in the churchyard:

> . . . lying out alone there in the dark night when our little parlour was warm and bright with fire and candle, and the doors of our house were - almost cruelly, it seemed to me sometimes - bolted and locked against it. (50-51)

Despite the lack of a man in the home, or perhaps because of it, the impression we get of the Copperfield home is of an ideal, at least from the point of view of a child. For David, Peggotty and his mother provide total security; all his physical and emotional wants and needs are met by them. The warmth and light of their home, as expressed in the above extract, is significant - elements of Ruskin's idea of the true nature of home can be recognised in it. Also significant is the fact that the doors of the house are said to be bolted and locked, for they are not simply locked against David's father. The outer world with all its pressure is firmly locked out of the Copperfield home. Sexuality is also absent. It, too, is firmly locked out.

Yet, while the home that David has with his mother and with Peggotty represents an ideal from a child's point of view this ideal is shown to be flawed; the essential flaw being the weakness of his mother. For while David's needs are met in this environment his mother's are not. We know that she is financially secure and that she is well-loved by David and Mr Peggotty. What she lacks, however, is a sexual existence.

David's mother is in no way devoid of sexuality. She has all of the physical characteristics of a Dickens female who is sexually appetising, being small in stature and pretty, with "luxuriant and beautiful hair"(53). She is also more than aware of her own sexuality - a fact that she makes quite clear to Peggotty - and clearly enjoys the attentions paid to her by Mr Murdstone, though she professes not to have invited them:

> "You talk of admiration. What am I to do? If people are so silly as to indulge the sentiment, is it my fault? What am I to do, I ask you? Would you wish me to shave my head and black my face, or disfigure myself with a burn, or a scald, or something of that sort? I dare say you would, Peggotty. I dare say you'd quite enjoy it." (69)

Through the character of Clara Copperfield Dickens makes his first definitive statement in the novel regarding sexuality; specifically, the sexuality of women.[3] Appealing to Mr Murdstone, no doubt, because of her healthy, though modest,

financial status, she is nonetheless more of an attraction because she is a "pretty little widow", physically inviting and sexually experienced. Her downfall occurs, however, not because of this fact but because she encourages the attention of Murdstone and is open to his sexual advances. Despite Peggotty's anger and her protestations that "Not such a one as this, Mr Copperfield wouldn't have liked" (68), Clara continues on her destructive course. Childlike in almost all aspects of her life, in sexual matters she is adult and determined: "Was ever any poor girl so ill-used by her servants as I am! Why do I do myself the injustice of calling myself a girl? Have I never been married, Peggotty?" (68).

David's role in the unfolding relationship between Mr Murdstone and his mother is primarily as an observer although his observations extend to his own position as a rejected partner for his mother. One of the reasons for the fact that David does not miss his father is surely that he has no desire to share his mother. He is aware of, and appreciative of, her sexual attractiveness - "my mother with her pretty hair and youthful shape" (61) - and this awareness is only highlighted by the attentions paid to her by the ubiquitous Murdstone. David's response is a jealous one, though he makes claims to having immediately recognised the threat in Murdstone's "ill-omened black eyes" (68).[4]

> As my mother stooped down on the threshold to take me in her arms and kiss me, the gentleman said I was a more highly privileged little fellow than a monarch - or something like that; for my later understanding comes, I am sensible, to my aid here.
>
> "What does that mean?" I asked him, over her shoulder.
>
> He patted me on the head; but somehow, I didn't like him or his deep voice, and I was jealous that his hand should touch my mother's in touching me - which it did. I put it away, as well as I could.
>
> "Oh, Davy!" remonstrated my mother.
>
> "Dear boy!" said the gentleman. "I cannot wonder at his devotion!"
>
> I never saw such a beautiful colour on my mother's face before. She gently chid me for being rude; and, keeping me close to her

> shawl, turned to thank the gentleman for taking so much trouble as to bring her home. She put her hand to him as she spoke, and as he met it with his own, she glanced, I thought, at me.
>
> "Let us say 'good night', my fine boy," said the gentleman, when he had bent his head - I saw him! - over my mother's little glove.
>
> "Good night!" said I.
>
> "Come! Let us be the best friends in the world!" said the gentleman, laughing. "Shake hands!" (67)

The above passage emphasises David's importance in the relationship between his mother and Murdstone. He is, quite literally, the man who comes between them and they both seek his approval, perhaps, even, his blessing. This may be, of course, merely the adult David inflating his own importance; his lack of approval certainly did not stop their relationship from proceeding, after all. Notwithstanding, the passage includes disturbing images of David being used as a tool; they desire each other but they touch him. Clara Copperfield's sexual desire, symbolised by her heightened colour, is displaced onto her son and Murdstone himself seeks physical contact through touching David.

Murdstone, himself, is the first villain that we are introduced to in the novel. His cruel and sadistic nature, which becomes evident in his treatment of David's mother following their marriage, is first hinted at in descriptions of his physical appearance. In these descriptions we are also given an indication that David is as aware of Murdstone's sexuality as is his mother; for he, too, is attracted by his dark looks:

> I could not make up my mind to sit in front of him without turning my head sometimes, and looking up in his face. He had that kind of shallow black eye - I want a better word to express an eye that has no depth in it to be looked into - which, when it is abstracted, seems from some peculiarity of light to be disfigured, for a moment at a time, by a cast. Several times when I glanced at him, I observed that appearance with a sort of awe, and wondered what he was thinking about so closely. His hair and whiskers were blacker and thicker, looked at so near, than even I had given them credit for being. A squareness about the lower part of his face, and the dotted indication of the strong black beard he shaved close every day, reminded me of the wax-work that had travelled into our neighbourhood some half-a-year before. This, his regular eyebrows, and the rich white, and

> black, and brown, of his complexion - confound his complexion, and his memory! - made me think of him, in spite of my misgivings, a very handsome man. I have no doubt that my poor dear mother thought him so too. (71)

Murdstone wields his power over David's mother primarily by isolating her from those around her, an idea explored in some detail by Mary Andrade: "first, by taking her keys away from her and prohibiting her from any position of authority or responsibility; and second, by forming a stern barrier between David and her and between Peggotty and her" (66). His interest in her, however, and the basis of his power over her is shown to be primarily sexual. David observes:

> He drew her to him, whispered in her ear, and kissed her. I knew as well, when I saw my mother's head lean down upon his shoulder, and her arm touch his neck - I knew as well that he could mould her pliant nature into any form he chose, as I know now that he did it. (95)

This, and David's reduced status and isolation from his mother, are emphasised by his removal from his old bedroom: "my little bed in a closet within my mother's room" (62). Following his mother's marriage David discovers that "My old bedroom was changed, and I was to be a long way off" (93). Murdstone has, quite literally, taken his place.

If Murdstone is the wielder of power it is his sister Jane to whom he gives responsibility for maintaining order in the domestic "prison" he creates. She is his appointed gaoler, symbolised in part by her possession of the household keys - symbolic of household order only when in the right hands - but also by her metallic nature generally:

> . . . a gloomy-looking lady she was; dark like her brother, whom she greatly resembled in face and voice; and with very heavy eyebrows, nearly meeting over her large nose, as if, being disabled by the wrongs of her sex from wearing whiskers, she had carried them to that account. She brought with her, two uncompromising hard black boxes, with her initials on the lids in hard brass nails. When she paid the coachman she took her money out of a hard steel purse, and she kept the purse in a very jail of a bag which hung upon her arm by a heavy chain, and shut up like a bite. I had never, at that time, seen such a metallic lady altogether as Miss Murdstone was. (97)

Ironically, part of Miss Murdstone's duties appear to be ensuring that sexuality is kept out of this household:

> Almost the first remarkable thing I observed in Miss Murdstone was, her being constantly haunted by a suspicion that the servants had a man secreted somewhere on the premises. Under the influence of this delusion, she dived into the coal-cellar at the most untimely hours, and scarcely ever opened the door of a dark cupboard without clapping it to again, in the belief that she had got him. (98)

Decidedly asexual in appearance Miss Murdstone is also anti-sexual in nature. Together, she and her brother demonstrate the firmness that eventually destroys the Copperfield household. David describes this as being "a certain, gloomy, arrogant, devil's humour, that was in them both" (99).

Despite the fact that it is Murdstone - the "murderer" - who is the villain of the piece it is, however, David's mother who holds responsibility for the fact that her honest home is so polluted. While there was no husband to protect her from the perils of the outside world she still held ultimate responsibility for keeping these perils at bay - "unless she herself has sought it, need enter no danger, no temptation, no cause of error or offence" (Ruskin 118).

Clara Copperfield's ultimate punishment is death. And the final piece of evidence to support the fact that her offence was a sexual offence is the existence of her second child. It was not sex, *per se* , that killed Clara Copperfield but sexual desire, and her death signifies the fact that there was no road back for her. Clara Copperfield is marginalised in the severest way possible.

And what of Peggotty, the other inhabitant of the home at Blunderstone? It would certainly be difficult for any reader of the novel to argue that the character of Clara Peggotty is endowed with sexuality. From the outset of the novel she is placed in a category of women that is distinct from that containing the pretty sexual playthings such as Clara Copperfield. David tells us that she is in a "different style" from his mother (66). Her physical attributes, as described by him, attest to this fact:

> The first objects that assume a distinct presence before me, as I look far back, into the blank of my infancy, are my mother with her pretty hair and youthful shape, and Peggotty with no shape at all, and eyes so dark that they seemed to darken their whole neighbourhood in her face, and cheeks and arms so hard and red that I wondered the birds didn't peck her in preference to apples. (61)

> I have an impression on my mind . . . of the touch of Peggotty's forefinger . . . and of its being roughened by needlework, like a pocket nutmeg-grater. (61)

The physical description we are given of Peggotty identifies her as a working-class woman. She is shapeless, dark, rough and red of skin; many of these characteristics being the result, no doubt, of hard physical work.

As a child, however, David believes Peggotty to be "a handsome woman"(66) despite the fact that she has none of his mother's obvious physical charms: " . . . of another school of beauty, I considered her a perfect example" (66). He recognises that she is different from his mother and, though it is not explicitly stated, is aware that the essential difference is one of class:

> There was a red velvet footstool in the best parlour, on which my mother had painted a nosegay. The groundwork of that stool, and Peggotty's complexion appeared to me to be one and the same thing. The stool was smooth, and Peggotty was rough, but that made no difference. (66)

If David's mother represents the middle-class, symbolised by the velvet of the footstool in the best parlour and the artistry of the nosegay painted on it, then Peggotty represents the class that supports that artistry. She is the stuff that supports the class to which David and his mother belong. They literally place their feet upon her.

David considers Peggotty to be handsome because of what her looks represent to him. She may be plump and rough but she is also, in many ways, the most stable influence in his life. David's mother may provide him with love but Peggotty represents both emotional and economic security. It is her practical abilities that make it possible for the Copperfield household to function; because of Peggotty David and his mother can maintain their middle-class lifestyle.

Interestingly, David appears to find it hard to understand why Peggotty has never married. It is not something that he sees as being entirely out of the question for her, primarily because, as a young child, at least, he considers marriage to be concerned with practicality rather than with physical attraction. Sexual motives are something that he recognises only as an adult. Peggotty does not at this point consider marriage as an option simply because, though an adult, she has the same attitudes towards marriage as David. She has no need to marry. She has a secure situation, so she thinks. Her eventual marriage only takes place following her mistress' death and is seen in strictly practical terms. While there may appear to be a contradiction in this argument it perhaps merely illustrates that a working-class woman's status and understanding is to be considered as no greater than that of a middle-class child:[5]

> "Davy dear, what should you think if I was to think of being married?" . . .
>
> "If you were thinking of being married - to Mr Barkis, Peggotty?"
>
> "Yes," said Peggotty.
>
> "I should think it would be a very good thing. For then you know, Peggotty, you would always have the horse and cart to bring you over to see me, and could come for nothing, and be sure of coming."
>
> "The sense of the dear!" cried Peggotty. "What I have been thinking of, this month back! Yes, my precious; and I think I should be more independent altogether, you see . . . And I shall be always near my pretty's resting-place," said Peggotty, musing "and be able to see it when I like; and when I lie down to rest, I may be laid not far off from my darling girl!"
>
> " . . . Barkis is a good plain creatur'," said Peggotty, "and if I tried to do my duty by him, I think it would be my fault if I wasn't - if I wasn't pretty comfortable." (92-193)

While the entire episode of Peggotty's and Barkis' marriage is written in comic mode there is a serious underlying message relating to what a lower class woman could and should expect from marriage. Peggotty is duly provided for but Barkis is obviously not the easiest of men. She is to him the "usefullest and best of

women" (367) but the tie between them remains weaker than the tie between her and her former mistress. Following his death she returns to her brother's home where, David recalls,

> She had fallen back, already, on the society of the work-box with St. Pauls upon the lid, the yard measure in the cottage, and the bit of wax candle; and there they all were, just as if they had never been disturbed. (509)

Peggotty's role in this novel is a threefold one. She represents working-class women, her domiciliary status in the Copperfield home and her own marriage to Barkis being given as examples of the "ideal" life of this class of woman. She also serves as a contrast to middle-class womanhood as represented by David's mother, although her unswerving goodness, practicality and downright good sense only serve to highlight the deficiencies in her young mistress. It is, after all, Peggotty who makes such a valiant attempt to keep Murdstone at bay by locking him out of their domestic haven:

> At this minute I see him turn round in the garden, and give us a last look with his ill-omened black eyes, before the door was shut.
>
> Peggotty, who had not said a word or moved a finger, secured the fastenings instantly, and we all went into the parlour. (68)

Despite her importance within the Copperfield home, however, Peggotty is shown to be most important because of the very fact that she survives the pollution and eventual collapse of this domestic cell. For, with the presentation of this cell we are shown a pattern that repeats itself throughout the novel. Blunderstone Rookery is only the first of David's ideals to be destroyed. Its destruction involves the marginalisation of those who do not "measure up" and the regrouping of those who do. The sensual and essentially flawed Mrs Copperfield is marginalised through her death. Peggotty, despite her failure to protect her mistress from her fate remains unflawed. She is shapeless, ageless and sexless - the ideal working-class woman; and, as such, she survives. Her move to Yarmouth signals the movement of the focus of David's narrative. A new domestic cell requires

examination, that of the Peggottys in Yarmouth, and it is Peggotty who provides the link that enables David to observe and become involved in this domestic circle.

Endnotes

[1] A veiled question regarding their sexual relationship?

[2] At this point in the novel Aunt Betsey is the central surveyor - the definer and categoriser. It should be noted that this is the position that she picks up later on. She is, in fact, the only character in the novel that David gives this control and power to. Trial titles again - "Being the personal history, adventures, experience and observation of Mr David Copperfield the Younger And his Great-Aunt Margaret." It appears that it was always planned that Aunt Betsey should have an important role in this novel.

[3] In writing about sexuality one major difficulty that faced Dickens was the fact that there was no clear agreement as to what constituted the "natural" in the area of female sexuality. On the one hand women were considered to be sexless. On the other, the existence of sexuality was recognised but was considered to be damaging to both woman and man. In Clara Copperfield we see a woman who suffers because of her sexuality.

[4] While the oedipal nature of the Murdstone - Clara Copperfield - David relationship has long been recognised and requires acknowledgement it is not of direct concern to my own examination of sexuality in this novel.

[5] Presumably, the same can be said of the working-class man. Barkis is, after all, interested in Peggotty primarily because of her domestic abilities. It is her rumoured skill with "apple parsties"(114) that inspires his proposal to her, at a point when, it should be added, he does not even know her name.

Yarmouth

The importance of matters of class to an examination of sexuality in this novel becomes especially clear once David's narrative focus shifts to an examination of the domestic circle comprising the Peggottys. For here we are invited to observe the sexual realities and expectations pertaining to the Victorian working classes.

David's examination and analysis of this domestic cell begins with a very "first-impressions" account of the Peggotty home and its inhabitants. It is an account that indicates that Yarmouth presents new possibilities to the young David in terms of the attainment of a happy home environment. From what has become an unhappy home at Blunderstone he comes to view the old boat at Yarmouth as a new kind of domestic ideal. John O. Jordan writes:

> David's expectations about the Peggotty's are shaped to some extent by their relationship to his own beloved Peggotty, who nursed him from the time he was a baby. Since Peggotty is virtually a mother to David, he enters the Yarmouth houseboat on a footing of immediate intimacy, almost as a member of the family. Since his own family unit is incomplete, he is delighted to find what he takes to be a happy, intact, nuclear family with a father, a mother, a sibling of each sex, and a little room just waiting to accept him as the latest addition to the group. (70)

Because of his childish notions regarding this family it is impossible to separate David the character from an examination of this domestic cell. For even in his adult narrative he insists on emphasising his childish vision of the Peggottys. This vision often blurs the reality of their existence, the reality being that this "ideal" is, essentially, as flawed as his own home was shown to be.

David begins his account of his initial visit to the Peggotty home by stating that, "If it had been Aladdin's palace, roc's egg and all, I suppose I could not have been more charmed with the romantic idea of living in it" (79). His adult perception intrudes at this point, however, with the comment that "If it had ever been meant to be lived in I might have thought it small, or inconvenient or lonely" (79). Though this later observation of David's may be tainted with his now developed class snobbery there is little doubt that the Peggotty home was, in fact, all of these things. In reality it was probably anything but romantic to live in a makeshift

home, though "it was beautifully clean inside, and as tidy as possible" (79) with only three rooms and within which the presence, and smell, of fish could not be escaped:

> One thing I particularly noticed in this delightful house, was the smell of fish; which was so searching, that when I took out my pocket-handkerchief to wipe my nose, I found it smelt exactly as if it had wrapped up a lobster. (80)

What was a romantic notion to David was probably no more than physical discomfort and material hardship to the Peggottys. And the secure retreat which David recalls - "After tea, when the door was shut and all was made snug (the nights being cold and misty now) it seemed to me the most delicious retreat that the imagination of man could conceive" (82) - was, in reality, no more than a trap.[1] The door, for one of this home's inhabitants, at least, was not a protection but a mechanism that shut out the desired world outside.

The flaw within the Peggotty household is, without a doubt, contained within the character of Emily, and a discussion of her part in the destruction of the Peggotty family will comprise the major part of this chapter. However, the Peggotty family as a whole and their relationships with each other deserve some mention. As J.O. Jordan notes, David's narrative regarding his initial childhood impression of the Peggotty home and family reveals an "error in perception" (71). Not only does he view their physical surroundings as being comfortable but he also assumes them to be a nuclear family which, of course, they are not. This fact, in itself, provides possibilities for relationships within this home that would otherwise not have existed and rules out the necessity for others. If this were a nuclear family Emily would have a mother, presumably one to whom she could turn for guidance and/or protection. In Mrs Gummidge she gets no useful substitute for her dead mother. And while there is no doubt that Dan Peggotty is fiercely affectionate towards his young niece, it is an affection that has invited observation and criticism

because of its sheer intensity. His physical state when speaking of her provides ample justification for such criticism:

> It was perfectly delightful to behold with what enthusiasm Mr Peggotty became inspired when he thought of his little favourite. He stands before me again, his bluff hairy face irradiating with a joyful love and pride, for which I can find no description. His honest eyes fire up, and sparkle, as if their depths were stirred by something bright. His broad chest heaves with pleasure. His strong loose hands clench themselves, in his earnestness; and he emphasizes what he says with a right arm that shows, in my pigmy view, like a sledge-hammer. (156-157)

Within this home Emily is sought by her "brother" and encouraged to acquiesce by her "father".[2] Where is the domestic peace and tranquillity for Emily and where can she run for protection and, indeed, for happiness? And it is in this word that we find the key to the flaw within this home, and the basis of David's wrong perceptions, for there is no real evidence to support the theory that it is a happy home. David certainly remembers the Peggottys as having been happy and as an adult he likes to preserve this view; this is no doubt his middle-class notion of what the working-classes should be: happy, hardworking and wholesome. There is no doubt, however, that even had he recognised that they were otherwise he would still have maintained that Emily should have been content with what her home had to offer her. Despite the fact that as twentieth-century readers we are bound to have some sympathy for Emily's plight and, indeed, to view her as victim, it is doubtful whether contemporary readers of the novel would have seen her as such. It is far more likely that they would have taken David's view or, at least, the view taken by those others who explicitly condemn her actions. For the story of Emily's sexual misadventure is inextricably woven in with the story of a woman who aspires to rise out of her class and, in the mid-nineteenth century, this was no mean crime.[3]

Herein lies the ambiguity in the presentation of the story of little Emily. Her story has long been seen as a fairly standard moralistic one, telling of the seduction of a young and innocent country girl by a lecherous man about town. On the

surface, of course, this is exactly what it is and it is well-known that in creating the characters of Emily and Martha Dickens hoped to soften the hearts of the public towards prostitutes. With Emily, in particular, Dickens saw an opportunity to put the situation of the fallen woman "before the thoughts of people in a new and pathetic way, and perhaps do some good". There is no doubt that he succeeded in doing so, for critics have always been, and continue to be, preoccupied with, and confused about, Emily's fate in the novel. While Martha, the true prostitute and the character whose story is presented alongside Emily's, is allowed to marry, albeit in the Australian outback, Emily is not. Instead, she devotes her life to good works, and refuses all marriage proposals, telling Mr Peggotty that "that's gone for ever" (942).

There is no doubt that the fate that Emily is allotted appears to contradict Dickens' personal views and to undermine the whole idea behind Urania Cottage, the institution for the rehabilitation of the "fallen" that he had been actively involved with for two years prior to beginning David Copperfield. While institutions such as Urania Cottage were not uncommon in the nineteenth century it appears that Dickens' attitude towards their inmates was. He defended the idea of the fallen looking to a future that included marriage when others, including Mrs Coutts, did not. For, in Dickens' opinion,

> in the generality of cases it is almost impossible to produce a penitence which shall stand the wear and tear of this rough world, without Hope - worldly hope - the hope of at one time or other recovering something like the lost station. (Slater 342)

It is worth noting that while Urania Cottage was first established to help prostitutes it later admitted other women. In Household Words in 1853 Dickens published an article on Urania Cottage in which he mentioned some of these "other" women:

> . . . starving needlewomen of good character, poor needlewomen who have robbed their furnished lodgings, violent girls committed to prison for disturbances in ill-conducted workhouses, poor girls from Ragged schools . . . domestic

> servants who have been seduced, and two young women held to bail for attempting suicide. (Slater 343)

Without exception all of the cases listed above are victims of society in one way or another and as such they were regarded by Dickens as being deserving of and capable of full rehabilitation. The question we must ask is whether Emily is characterised as a victim. The confusion of critics regarding her fate has clearly arisen because her unsatisfactory home environment implies that she is. Q.D. Leavis states:

> Emily is framed as orphan, over-sheltered and indulged by her family in the boat, and moreover given to understand by Steerforth that he will "make her a lady" and he, so to speak, vouched for as to character by being David's old friend and hero; and in addition there is her intolerable position of being about to marry her dull cousin Ham, having yielded to pressure to engage herself to him to please her uncle. All these points are piled up to amount to a demand for a verdict of Not Guilty, even from strict Victorian moralists, presumably. In consonance with this, the blame is firmly laid at Mrs Steerforth's door. (77-78)
>
> One mistake of a very young girl with Emily's excuses can't be supposed to entail ruin for life in the eyes of any right-minded person! (79)

It appears from the treatment afforded her, however, that at least one "right-minded person" believed that Emily had no excuse for her actions. The reason for this can perhaps be discovered by considering her character and her behaviour in the light of the following proposition, put forward by Sally Mitchell in The Fallen Woman, Chastity, Class and Women's Reading, 1835-1880:

> There is not even any reasonable term short of the clinical or barbarous to describe, as a group, all women who have sexual experience that is not sanctioned by marriage. The two words most commonly used imply an important difference in the way woman is seen. A seduced woman is the helpless victim of a superior male. A fallen woman is capable of sin and therefore responsible for her own destiny. The third possibility, an emancipated woman, uses her body as she pleases for reasons of her own - but we will not find any favorable portrait of her in fiction written between 1835 and 1880. (x)

In analysing the characters of both Martha and Emily I will consider the first two categories as outlined by Mitchell with the aim of illustrating some important differences in the way that Dickens portrays these two "fallen" women. The results

of this analysis will I hope show that Emily is far from being the victim that readers have assumed her to be and this fact must alter our reading of the entire section of the novel that deals with the family at Yarmouth.

Emily's story is told, of course, by David and in order to get any real insight into her character it is necessary to, at first, read between the lines of his childish reminiscences. Our first introduction to her is as a very young child when she immediately impresses us as being in a different mould from the rest of her family and somewhat at odds with her environment. While Dan Peggotty, Ham and Mrs Gummidge are portrayed as decent, plain "fisherman folk", "rough and ready", Emily is a beautiful little girl who is already aspiring to something beyond her class. David remembers her blue beads, perhaps symbolic of her desire to be a lady, a desire that she expresses even at this young age.

Q.D. Leavis appears to suggest that Emily's status as an orphan makes her vulnerable. The way she speaks of her parents, however, implies something quite different. Despite the fact that she is generally considered to be innocent and soft-hearted, her mention of them suggests a hard heart. While David mentions his own orphan status in an attempt to draw a comparison with her own situation Emily merely points out what she sees as the major differences between them: "Your father was a gentleman and your mother is a lady; and my mother was a fisherman's daughter, and my Uncle Dan is a fisherman" (85). While Emily never knew her parents and cannot be expected to actively miss them one might expect that her feelings towards them would consist of more than this. As it is, there is no observable yearning for them on her part. Steerforth, at one point in the novel, expresses the wish that he had a "steadfast and judicious father" to guide him (381). No equivalent wish ever passes Emily's lips that we know of. Her only regret, it appears, is that she was not born a lady; there is a distinct possibility, therefore, that her fate might have been the same even if her parents had lived.

The childish innocence that Q.D. Leavis refers to can also be questioned. Emily is more aware of reality than the young David as can be seen in the way she speaks of the sea: "'Ah! but it's cruel . . . I have seen it very cruel to some of our men. I have seen it tear a boat as big as our house all to pieces!'" (84). These are surely not the words of a childish innocent.

In many ways it is David's own naivity that veils the true nature of Emily. From their first meeting she shows a knowledge beyond her years even down to what could be termed a sexual awareness. On their first meeting David offers to kiss her but instead of innocently accepting his offer she runs away and hides. David explains this away as shyness but we can see otherwise. She is only shy in front of her family. With David, on the beach, she is bold and even he does not fail to notice her "bright eye" (84). Before the end of the visit Emily has consented to be kissed and is established as David's first love.

In the time that elapses between David's and Emily's first meeting and their second meeting, which takes place after the death of David's mother, we hear that Emily is "getting to be a woman" (156). David first sees her on the beach,

> . . . a little creature still in stature, though she was grown. But when she drew nearer, and I saw her blue eyes looking bluer, and her dimpled face looking brighter, and her whole self prettier and gayer, a curious feeling came over me, that made me pretend not to know her, and pass by as if I were looking at something a long way off. I have done such a thing since in later life, or I am mistaken. (194)

Emily is sexually attractive - it should be noted that she has the three features commonly given to such women in Dickens: curls, dimples and a small stature - and David obviously responds to this even if he does not recognise his own sexual feelings. During this visit of his to Yarmouth she also shows herself as sexually aware, though her behaviour and feelings are lost on those around her, including the young David:

> She seemed to delight in teasing me, which was a change in her I wondered at very much . . . instead of coming to sit by me, she went and bestowed her company upon that grumbling Mrs

> Gummidge: and on Mr Peggotty's inquiring why, rumpled her hair all over her face to hide it, and could do nothing but laugh. (194)
>
> She had such a pleasant manner of being both sly and shy at once that she captivated me more than ever. (195)
>
> Wild and full of childish whims as Emily was, she was more of a little woman than I had supposed. She seemed to have got a great distance from me, in little more than a year. She liked me, but she laughed at me, and tormented me; and when I went to meet her, stole home another way, and was laughing at the door when I came back, disappointed. (197)

The picture that we get of Emily at this point is not of an innocent, young country girl, but of a knowing adolescent, interested in the opposite sex and aware of her own sexual charms. When she and David accompany Barkis and Peggotty to their wedding she once again consents to being kissed - a first attempt at sexual experimentation? - but laughs at David's violent protestations of love: "The fairy little woman said I was 'a silly boy'; and then laughed so charmingly that I forgot the pain of being called by that name, in the pleasure of looking at her" (201).

The most telling behaviour of Emily's at this point in her development, however, is her reaction to David's description of Steerforth:

> I was running on very fast indeed, when my eyes rested on little Emily's face, which was bent forward over the table, listening with the deepest attention, her breath held, her blue eyes sparkling like jewels, and the colour mantling in her cheeks. (196)

David is so impressed with Emily's look that he stops speaking and everyone observes her. Dan Peggotty assumes that Emily is merely impressed with David's account of his friend as they all are and wishes to meet him. She, of course, does wish to meet him but for entirely different reasons from those of her uncle. In David's description of Steerforth she recognises an attractive upper-class man and not just David's old school chum. Her embarrassment is caused, not by merely being observed, as David thinks, but by being observed thinking anything but proper thoughts. Her mantling colour obviously makes her feel transparent and ashamed for she hangs her head and eventually runs away and hides herself.

David's evaluation of their sexual status at this stage does not coincide at all with Emily's:

> What happiness (I thought) if we were married, and were going away anywhere to live among the trees and in the fields, never growing older, never growing wiser, children ever, rambling hand in hand through sunshine and among flowery meadows, laying down our heads on moss at night, in a sweet sleep of purity and peace, and buried by the birds when we were dead! Some such picture, with no real world in it, bright with the light of our innocence, and vague as the stars afar off was in my mind all the way. I am glad to think there were two such guileless hearts at Peggotty's marriage as little Emily's and mine. I am glad to think the Loves and Graces took such airy forms in its homely procession. (202)

Emily has anything but a "guileless heart". She is already older and wiser and though still "pure" in body she is no longer "pure" in thought. The real world has already beckoned Emily. It is not Steerforth who brings sexuality to the Peggotty household. It is already there, in the person of Emily. His later arrival simply makes it possible for sexuality to take what Dickens portrays as its destructive course. Emily is yet another woman in the novel who suffers because of her sexuality.

While Emily's true nature is largely unrecognised by David and by her immediate family, Mr Peggotty, Mrs Gummidge and Ham, it does not go unrecognised by those outside the family, who know her well and can perhaps view her behaviour more objectively. When David makes a visit to Yarmouth with Steerforth after leaving school he visits the Omers. From them we hear everything that has passed in Emily's life in the years since David's last visit to Yarmouth and everything we learn reinforces the idea that Emily is far from innocent and guileless.

Mr Omer is gentle in his criticism of Emily but it is because of this general lack of malice that we must take his criticisms seriously and give credence to the things that he says. Though pleased with Emily in her role as an apprentice in his

business Mr Omer speaks of her as a young woman who is anything but popular with her townspeople:

> Emily's her name, and she's little too. But if you'll believe me, she has such a face of her own that half the women in this town are mad against her . . . half the women in Yarmouth - ah! and in five mile round are mad against that girl . . . She hasn't taken much to any companions here; she hasn't taken kindly to any particular acquaintances and friends, not to mention sweethearts. In consequence, an ill-natured story got about, that Emily wanted to be a lady. Now my opinion is, that it came into circulation principally on account of her sometimes saying, at the school, that if she was a lady she would like to do so-and-so for her uncle - don't you see? - and buy him such and such fine things . . . Then out of a very little, she could dress herself, you see, better than most others could out of a deal, and that made things unpleasant. Moreover, she was rather what might be called wayward - I'll go so far as to say what I should call wayward myself - didn't know her own mind quite - a little spoiled - and couldn't, at first, exactly bind herself down. (363)

While Mr Omer does his best to justify and defend Emily and her behaviour his daughter Minnie is far less restrained. From her few terse comments we gather that she is not as ready to excuse Emily as her father, and in a novel where the sisterhood of women is so highly extolled this should not go unnoticed.

David's own evaluation of Emily at this point is still tainted by his youthful feelings towards her:

> Looking through the glass, I saw her sitting at her work. I saw her, a most beautiful little creature, with the cloudless blue eyes, that had looked into my childish heart, turned laughingly upon another child of Minnie's who was playing near her; with enough of wilfulness in her bright face to justify what I had heard; with much of the old capricious coyness lurking in it; but with nothing in her pretty looks, I am sure, but what was meant for goodness and for happiness, and what was on a good and happy course. (364)

Despite everything he has heard and everything that he can see for himself in Emily's face and manner he is still not prepared to admit the truth about her. This, however, can be seen as evidence to support the theory that when dealing with the story of Emily David refuses to take a firm position, choosing rather to sit on the fence. He is not prepared to outwardly condemn her but nor is he prepared to

remove the evidence for her guilt from his narrative. The reasons for his stand, or lack of it, will become increasingly clear.

As stated previously, it is difficult for any modern-day reader not to have some sympathy for Emily, as evidenced by the arguments of commmentators such as Q.D. Leavis, for, on the surface, she has nothing to look forward to in life save marriage to Ham and the continuation of an existence that she has always dreamed of rising out of. There are no choices available to Emily despite Mr Peggotty's comment that she's to be "as free as a little bird" (373). Her earlier refusal of Ham's marriage proposal to her may have been tolerated by her friends but her later decision to accept him is applauded. Two things are worth noting at this point. The first is Emily's given reason for refusing him on the first occasion: "'What! Him!' says Emily. 'Him that I've know'd so intimate so many years, and like so much. Oh, Uncle! I never can have him. He's such a good fellow!'" (373). Emily is quite definite in her refusal and quite specific when it comes to the reason for it. She makes it more than clear that she does not have feelings for Ham save those that she would have for a brother. It is interesting though that she also states that she could not have him because he is a "good fellow". It is difficult to say whether this is meant as a compliment or an insult but it could be interpreted in both ways. She may feel that Ham is too good for her, considering her "sinful" desires, or she may be expressing some secret desire for a man who is not good, ie, a sexual man - a Steerforth? The second point to note is that Emily's later acceptance of Ham's proposal is merely a sign that she is submitting to her fate and does not necessarily indicate any change of heart. Perhaps she viewed marriage to Ham as at least providing her with the opportunity of having a home. Without such a marriage her future was even more desperate, consisting of a continuation of life in the boat and ongoing, even gruelling, work with the Omers. Whatever her reasons for changing her mind it is clear that in doing so she is making everyone else happy if not herself. Mr Peggotty in expressing his delight emphasises the fact that her

happiness is not necessarily the most important thing. He is more conscious of the fact that it is the "brightest night" in his life (373).

David, too, is impressed by Emily's acceptance of Ham: "'She is engaged to be married to a most worthy and deserving man in her own station of life. I esteem her her good sense, as much as I admire her for her good looks.'" (393). His typically pompous comments beautifully reflect Victorian middle-class attitudes. Emily is being sensible in accepting Ham; it is a sign that she has grown up, settled down and thrown away all of her inappropriate and sinful dreams of becoming a lady. She has not only accepted Ham, in fact; in doing so she has also accepted her station in life and her fate.

It is, however, a very short-lived acceptance; within weeks Emily has left Yarmouth with Steerforth. In doing so she shows, once and for all, that she is lacking in the good sense that David has previously attributed to her. She has made the choice to run away from the safe and respectable home that Yarmouth and Ham offer her in order to live a non-respectable existence elsewhere. Emily's rejection of her past is complete and devastating for it is not only a rejection of Ham but also of all positive values. When Q. D Leavis makes the assertion that the verdict for Emily should be "Not Guilty" she is somewhat missing the point. Strict Victorian moralists would no doubt have agreed with David and his evaluation of Emily's situation.

As absolute proof that Emily is guilty we can also look at her own evaluation of her situation. Emily undergoes a great moral struggle prior to her decision to run away with Steerforth. She knows that it is wrong in her to want more than Ham can offer, for as she says:

> "Oh Ham!" she exclaimed, still weeping pitifully, "I am not so good a girl as I ought to be! I know I have not the thankful heart, sometimes, I ought to have! . . . I try your love too much. I know I do!" she sobbed. "I'm often cross to you, and changeable with you, when I ought to be so far different. You are never so to me. Why am I ever so to you, when I should

> think of nothing but how to be grateful, and to make you happy!" (399)
>
> "I want to be a hundred times more thankful than I am. I want to feel more, what a blessed thing it is to be the wife of a good man, and to lead a peaceful life." (400)

So much attention is given in the novel to Emily's childhood desires to become a lady and do great things for her uncle that many commentators, Q.D. Leavis included, appear to have become confused about Emily's departure and the fact that the fault lies with her. For there is no doubt at all that Emily has no charitable impulses when she runs away with Steerforth. She knows how her departure will grieve her uncle and yet she still leaves. She must also know that even if she were to become a lady her uncle would never accept any of the riches that she would have to offer. If she had had his happiness at heart she would have married Ham.

In her confrontation with Rosa Dartle after her return to England Emily makes an attempt to defend her situation, though she claims not to be doing so, by referring to the charms of Steerforth:

> "If you live in his home and know him, you know, perhaps, what his power with a weak, vain girl might be . . . I know well, and he knows well, or he'll know when he comes to die, and his mind is troubled with it, that he used all his power to deceive me, and that I believed him, trusted him, and loved him!" (788)

How is it possible, however, to view Steerforth's actions as deceptive when it is obvious from Emily's parting letter to her family that he had made no promises or, alternatively, that she did not have complete faith in his promises? In this letter she claims that she will never return, "unless he brings me back a lady" (513). The key word here is "unless". And if Emily is not convinced that she will become a lady her key motivation for eloping with Steerforth must be sexual desire:

> The light, bold, fluttering little figure turned and came back safe to me, and I soon laughed at my fears and at the cry I had uttered . . . But there have been times since, in my manhood . . . when I have thought, Is it possible, among the possibilities of hidden things, that in the sudden rashness of the child and her wild look so far off, there was any merciful attraction of her into danger, any tempting her towards him permitted on the part of her dead

> father, that her life might have a chance of ending that day? There has been a time since when I have wondered whether, if the life before her could have been revealed to me at a glance, and so revealed as that a child could fully comprehend it, and if her preservation could have depended on a motion of my hand, I ought to have heald it up to save her. There has been a time since - I do not say it lasted long, but it has been - when I have asked myself the question, would it have been better for little Em'ly to have had the waters close above her head that morning in my sight, and when I have answered Yes, it would have been. (86)

> "Em'ly's run away! Oh, Mas'r Davy, think how she's run away, when I pray my good and gracious God to kill her (her that is so dear above all things) sooner than let her come to ruin and disgrace!" (513)

David's childhood memory of Emily "springing forward to her destruction" (86) and Ham's anguished outburst serve to illustrate the enormity of Emily's sin. While Peggotty lays full blame at Mrs Steerforth's door and Ham considers himself at least partially responsible for Emily's fall the real blame surely lies with her. For Emily cannot be seen as a seduced woman, as defined by Sally Mitchell. She was no helpless victim. Though, no doubt, seduced - "You need not call me Little, you need not call me by the name I have disgraced" (652) - it was a seduction that she chose. Emily is a true fallen woman, "capable of sin and therefore responsible for her own destiny".

It is not surprising, therefore, that Emily is allotted a harsh fate. Any lighter sentence may have seemed inappropriate and would surely have weakened Dickens' essential moral argument. Anyone who considers Emily hard done by should really consider the opinion of Betsy Trotwood:

> "Poor Emily!" said I.

> "Oh, don't talk to me about poor," returned my aunt. "She should have thought of that, before she caused so much misery!" (564)

An examination of the story of Emily in this novel is not complete without a corresponding analysis of the character of Martha Endell:

> "It's a young woman, sir - a young woman that Em'ly knowed once, and doen't ought to know no more. It's a poor wurem, Mas'r Davy," said Ham, "as is trod under foot by all the town. Up street and down street. The mowld o' the churchyard don't hold any that the folk shrink away from more." (396)

Compared with Emily, Martha is a very shadowy character in the novel, both literally and figuratively. Her introduction, however, comes at a significant point and is another fine example of the way in which Dickens brings characters together in order to highlight their differences or, as in this case, their potentially common paths.

Martha is first sighted by David and Steerforth on the beach at Yarmouth, following their brief meeting with Ham and Emily:

> Suddenly there passed us - evidently following them - a young woman whose approach we had not observed, but whose face I saw as she went by, and thought I had a faint remembrance of. She was lightly dressed; looked bold, and haggard, and flaunting and poor; but seemed for the time, to have given all that to the wind which was blowing, and to have nothing in her mind but going after them. As the dark distant level, absorbing their figures into itself, left but itself visible between us and the sea and clouds, her figure disappeared in like manner, still no nearer to them than before. (384)

Martha's entrance comes at the time of Emily's temptation and moral struggle. The girl who repeatedly claims to have once been just like Emily is a warning to her not to follow her desires. She also acts as a warning to Steerforth though he, too, fails to heed it. For if Emily is "overset" by Martha's presence so too is Steerforth. It is he who senses that her shadowy presence is some sort of evil omen (384-385).

In many ways it is true that Martha was once like Emily. Raised in Yarmouth she was at school with her, although two or three years older, and the two girls worked together at Mr Omer's. It is here, however, that the similarity ends. Through Mr Peggotty, much later in the novel, we learn of her family history, a history that he has been told of by Emily:

> "I have heerd her tell," said Mr Peggotty, "as you was early left fatherless and motherless, with no friend fur to take, in a rough seafaring-way, their place. Maybe you can guess that if you'd had such a friend, you'd have got into a way of being fond of him in course of time, and that my niece was kiender daughter-like to me." (752)

Mr Peggotty's short speech highlights the differences between Martha and Emily. Though both were orphaned at a young age their lives have taken quite different paths. No matter whether we regard Emily's family as deficient there is little doubt that Martha is presented as not having had the opportunities available to her friend. Martha did not have the benefit of being taken in by a surrogate parent as did Emily. The loss of her parents, instead, clearly meant the loss of any possibility for domestic security and moral guidance. We can also assume, perhaps, that she lacked financial security, a common enough reason for a fall into prostitution. There is certainly no indication that she has ever had the opportunity that Emily has to marry a worthy man in her own class who loves her and can provide her with a home of her own.

When we first meet Martha she is presented in a fairly positive light, despite her profession. She can, in many ways, be seen as an example of Dickens' ideal penitent prostitute for she wishes to change; she wants to "do well" (398). She also recognises one important fact regarding her future, this being that she can never return to her former position in Yarmouth. Respectability must be sought elsewhere. London is, of course, the wrong place to seek it, especially as she lacks hope, the "worldly hope" that Dickens refers to as being essential for any lasting penitence.

When David and Peggotty discover Martha in London she is, literally, on the brink of destruction; it is only their action that saves her from throwing herself in the river. The only hope that Martha has left is that there will be peace in Death: "How can I go on as I am, a solitary curse to myself, a living disgrace to everyone I come near." (751). Through David and Peggotty, however, Martha is offered the

chance to redeem herself in life. The task of finding Emily is one that she treats as sacred:

> She lifted up her eyes and solemnly declared that she would devote herself to this task, fervently and faithfully. That she would never waver in it, never be diverted from it, never relinquish it, while there was any chance of hope. If she were not true to it, might the object she now had in life, which bound her to something devoid of evil, in its passing away from her, leave her more forlorn, and more despairing, if that were possible, than she had been upon the river's brink that night; and then might all help, human and Divine, renounce her evermore! (753)

Emily's fall, in many ways, serves as a turning-point for Martha, for as Emily moves towards destruction Martha moves towards redemption. Her solemn oath symbolises her return to respectable society, a return that is only made complete by her emigration to Australia. There she is truly rewarded - her conduct having fully proved her "earnestness" and "reformation" - through becoming the "faithful wife of an honest man". It should be noted that Martha receives no more than Emily was once offered by Ham, for her marriage in Australia is no love match:

> A young man, a farm-labourer, as come by us on his way to market with his mas'r's drays - a journey of over five hundred mile, theer and back - made offers fur to take her fur his wife (wives is very scarce theer), and then to set up fur their two selves in the Bush. She spoke to me fur to tell him her trew story. I did. They was married, and they live fower hundred mile away from any voices but their own and the singing birds. (942)[4]

Considering their eventual, and very different fates, it is interesting to consider the possibility that Emily is as much there to support Martha's character as Martha is to support Emily's. Whichever way one looks at it, however, there is no question that both characters are required in order for Dickens to convey his warning to the potentially "fallen" and support and hope for those seeking redemption.

As a final comment on the fates of Emily and Martha it is also worth considering that in choosing not to marry, or in being in a position of not being able to marry, Emily is in one major respect lucky. Through not entering any relationships she is in a position of being able to conceal her past:

> "Some thinks," he said, "as her affection was ill-bestowed; some, as her marriage was broken off by death. No one knows how 'tis. She might have married well, a mort of times,' but, uncle' she says to me, 'that's gone for ever.' Cheerful along with me; retired when others is by . . . liked by young and old; sowt out by all that has any trouble. That's Em'ly!" (942)

Martha, on the other hand, has to go through the trauma of telling her husband-to-be her past and, though he still marries her - "wives is very scarce theer" - her status must surely be diminished because of his knowledge. Is this the reason for their living so far from "society"? The answer to this question is, of course, "yes".

While I have stated elsewhere that, in the first instance, I am more concerned with David's role as narrator than with Dickens' role as author, when it comes to the stories of Emily and Martha it is extremely difficult completely to eradicate Dickens' presence from the narrative. The fate of fallen women was one that was dear to his heart and when one considers his statement of intention relating to the presentation of the two "fallen" women in this narrative it is clear that he had a personal interest in their respective fates.

This is not to say, however, that David's presentation of these two women and his part in their histories is insignificant. It is, however, more important when considered in the light of his adult relationship with Steerforth, which subject belongs in another chapter of this thesis. Before moving on to this, however, it is necessary to examine the workings of the domestic cell in which we essentially see David develop from child to adult. At Canterbury he is confronted with yet another family and with more opportunities to examine and comment on sexual issues relating to both the middle class and the working class.

Endnotes

[1] John Jordan also notes that David is given special treatment within the Peggotty home, that "from the outset, class differences in the houseboat are carefully observed"(71) This, no doubt, explains his enjoyment of his time spent with the Peggottys and his generally high opinion of them. It, also, however, reveals his sense of social superiority, and the fact that within his narrative he does not question the special treatment afforded to him by this family suggests that his view has not changed. Is Dickens, here, inviting us to criticise David? I think not.

[2] There appears to be little doubt that Mr Peggotty gets some perverse pleasure from witnessing the relationship between Ham and Emily. He cannot have Emily, though there are indications that he desires her. The next best thing is for his "son" to have her. Also, note the illustrations of these two men; in particular, "Mrs Gummidge casts a damp on our departure" and "We arrive unexpectedly at Mr Peggotty's Fireside". In them, the two men are shown to bear a striking resemblance to each other, in both looks and attitude. In many ways they appear to be one and the same man.

[3] Even if we succeed in turning a blind eye to any apparent flaws in the Peggotty family as a whole it has to be acknowledged that they appear to be marginalised, en masse. It is not only Emily, after all, who ends up in Australia and Ham certainly does not escape punishment, though his crime is never made entirely clear.

[4] It is interesting to note that the farmer who takes Martha for a wife ends up living even further away from humanity than he had previously. He, too, must pay the price, presumably, for choosing to have an association with such a woman.

Canterbury

"I can lift my eyes to this dear face, revered as a father's, loved as a husband's, sacred to me in my childhood as a friend's, and solemnly declare that in my lightest thought I have never wronged you; never wavered in the love and fidelity I owe you!"

David Copperfield (731-732)

In Blunderstone and in Yarmouth we are provided with examples of domestic cells in which women are presented as victims of male sexual dominance. Yet, while there is no question that Murdstone and Steerforth are villains, the stories of Clara Copperfield and Emily stand out because here we are shown two women who are as much victims of their own sexuality as they are of the men who take advantage of their weaknesses. They are women who are responsible, to a great extent, for their own fates. Clara Copperfield steps outside the ideal of middle-class womanhood and Emily makes the mistake of attempting to rise above her working-class station and expectations for working-class womanhood. Both women suffer accordingly.

With the narrative's shift to Canterbury we are presented with a domestic cell that parallels these two but which, at the same time, is a contrast to what we have seen previously. The middle-class home of Mr Wickfield and his daughter Agnes contains the same basic ingredients as the Copperfield and Peggotty homes - the villain is present in the form of Uriah Heep and the potential victim in Agnes. But, while the ingredients are the same the recipe's outcome is entirely different.

The reason for this is, of course, that the woman at the centre of this home is none other than David's future wife; the woman with whom he eventually achieves the middle-class domestic ideal which eludes him for so long. At the time of the writing of this narrative Agnes is without fault, as she must be, and there is probably no need to stress the fact that the wife without fault has *always* been without fault. For this reason, Agnes, inasmuch as it is possible to be perfect, *is* perfect. All the weaknesses and vices that we have witnessed in the characters of Emily and Clara Copperfield are apparently lacking in this little woman. She is nothing less than a shining example of womanhood, both selfless and sexless.

Agnes' exceptional nature is first hinted at in the description of her home, a description which is provided prior to our even being aware of her existence. It is significant, however, because of the great emphasis that David places on its

cleanliness and purity, an emphasis that certainly exists because of his adult knowledge of the qualities of the little woman housed within its walls:

> It was quite spotless in its cleanliness. The old-fashioned brass knocker on the low arched door, ornamented with carved garlands of fruit and flowers, twinkled like a star; the two stone steps descending to the door were as white as if they had been covered with fair linen; and all the angles and corners, and carvings and mouldings, and quaint little panes of glass, and quainter little windows, though as old as the hills, were as pure as any snow that ever fell upon the hills. (275)

There is no doubt, in David's mind at least, that Agnes too, unlike her predecessors, is as pure as the driven snow. One oft-quoted passage from the novel will serve to illustrate David's assessment of her:

> Mr Wickfield tapped at a door in a corner of the panelled wall, and a girl of about my own age came quickly out and kissed him. On her face, I saw immediately the placid and sweet expression of the lady whose picture had looked at me downstairs. It seemed to my imagination as if the portrait had grown womanly, and the original remained a child. Although her face was quite bright and happy, there was a tranquillity about it, and about her - a quiet, good, calm, spirit - that I have never forgotten; that I shall never forget.
>
> This was his little housekeeper, his daughter Agnes, Mr Wickfield said. When I heard how he said it, and saw how he held her hand, I guessed what the one motive of his life was.
>
> She had a little basket trifle hanging at her side, with keys in it; and she looked as staid and discreet a housekeeper as the old house could have. She listened to her father as he told her about me, with a pleasant face; and when he had concluded, proposed to my aunt that we should go upstairs and see my room. We all went together, she before us . . .
>
> I cannot call to mind where or when, in my childhood, I had seen a stained glass window in a church. Nor do I recollect its subject. But I knew that when I saw her turn round, in the grave light of the old staircase, and wait for us, above, I thought of that window; and I associated something of its tranquil brightness with Agnes Wickfield ever afterwards. (279-280)

Agnes is domestically competent, as evidenced by her possession of the household keys and here she differs from both Emily and Clara, neither of whom were responsible for the management of their respective households. Later references to Agnes highlight her other qualities, all of which were deemed to be appropriate, by

Dickens at least, for young middle-class women of the time. She plays the piano, teaches young people, tends to the needy - including, most notably, Emily - but at no time ventures far from the confines of her home and her responsibilities to it and to her father. Agnes is practical and does not waste her time with useless and/or decorative accomplishments.

Agnes' appearance is also completely different from that of both Emily and Clara Copperfield; as with Traddles' Sophy, there is nothing to indicate that she is a beauty and she is certainly no sex kitten. Indeed, there is nothing to suggest that she possesses any of the physical signs of sexuality. She has neither curls nor dimples. She is never described as pretty or vain. Instead, adjectives such as "staid" and "discreet" are used to describe her appearance. She is placid, sweet and tranquil; never bold or coquettish.

However, the most outstanding feature of David's initial description of Agnes is that it highlights her constancy and the relative constancy of David's regard for her. For what Agnes was, Agnes still is. David's first impressions and memories of her have not been tainted by any later knowledge or experience. David says he will "never forget" her "quiet, good, calm spirit" and that he associated her with the tranquil brightness of the stained glass window "ever afterwards". Presumably, the only change that does take place in terms of the way that David regards her is that he eventually moves from viewing her as a sister to viewing her as a wife.

For the majority of the narrative, however, David does regard Agnes as a sister only, as a woman who is no more than a religious icon; his "good angel" (426), a woman "so much too loving and too good for anyone that I could think of . . . " (442). To many readers of the novel David's presentation of Agnes is profoundly irritating. It should *always* be remembered, however, that his presentation is not necessarily accurate. There is, in fact, much evidence to suggest that Agnes possesses many more human qualities than David allows or gives her credit for, many of these, as I hope to prove, less than admirable ones. Suffice to

say at this point, however, that Agnes does not *ask* to be placed on a pedestal. David *puts* her there; a fact that, by all accounts, eventually frustrates and saddens her:

> "Is there nothing else, Sister?" I said.
>
> Her colour, which had just now faded, returned, and faded again. She smiled; with a quiet sadness, I thought; and shook her head . . .
>
> "Nothing good is difficult to you," said I.
>
> Her colour came and went once more; and once more, as she bent her head, I saw the same sad smile . . .
>
> It was for me to guard this sisterly affection with religious care. It was all that I had left myself, and it was a treasure. If I once shook the foundations of the sacred confidence and usage, in virtue of which it was given to me, it was lost, and could never be recovered. I set this steadily before myself. The better I loved her, the more it behoved me never to forget it. (913)

What David fails to recognise for so long is Agnes' need to be more than a sister. And though Carey may be carrying things too far in suggesting that Agnes is "pointing not upwards but towards the bedroom" (171) there is little doubt that she is undeserving of Orwell's criticism that she is "the real legless angel of Victorian Romance." She is certainly presented to us as such but this, it must be stressed, is David's presentation. As Carey states "the inadequacy lies in David, not her" (171).

The way in which David presents Agnes is important for two reasons. Firstly, it serves to emphasise the fact that this is David's narrative; that in relating the "story" of his life he is in control of the events and characters recorded in it, or, as Michael Miller puts it, is "an active if unconscious fashioner of his own narrative and not, as often charged, a merely passive recorder of the events that surround him" (66). Secondly, in fashioning his narrative he ensures that he justifies his own position as a member of the middle class. This he does, in part, by insisting on creating the perfect partner out of what is perhaps mere flesh and blood. Agnes, if not perfect, must be shown to be perfect even if it is slightly incongruous that he

admit her into the human role of wife later in his narrative. In marrying Agnes, of course, he inflates his own importance rather more than he deflates *her* supposed perfection. For in becoming her husband he becomes the person most deserving of her "too loving" and "too good" nature.

If Agnes is different from her female predecessors in the novel her situation, on the surface at least, is not. Just as Clara Copperfield's and Emily's lives are threatened by villainous men so too is Agnes'. With Agnes, however, the essential difference is that we are led to believe that she is in no way responsible for the threat she is faced with in Uriah Heep. She does not invite him into her home. She does not invite his advances nor does she encourage them. She is, in a sense, presented as being more of a victim than either Emily or Clara Copperfield simply because of this fact. For it is her father who has paved the way for Uriah to enter their domestic establishment, first by hiring him but, most importantly, through having weaknesses that enable Uriah to take advantage of him.

There is no doubt that Uriah Heep is an entirely uncongenial character. Even David, not known at this point in his life for his intuitive insights, claims to have immediately recognised something in him that was not quite right. His reaction to Uriah on first seeing him is one of fascination but on touching him this fascination turns to total abhorrence:

> As I came back, I saw Uriah Heep shutting up the office; and feeling friendly towards everybody, went in and spoke to him, and at parting, gave him my hand. But oh, what a clammy hand his was! as ghostly to the touch as to the sight! I rubbed mine afterwards, to warm it, and to rub his off. (281)

> It was such an uncomfortable hand, that, when I went to my room, it was still cold and wet upon my memory. Leaning out of (the) window, and seeing one of the faces on the beamends looking at me sideways, I fancied it was Uriah Heep got up there somehow, and shut him out in a hurry. (282)

David's reaction in wanting to "shut Uriah out" is significant in that he obviously recognises him as being a potential threat to the household. But what is it in Uriah Heep that elicits this response in him, a response that is so strong that he

refers to himself as being attracted to Uriah "in very repulsion" (444)? The answer to this question may be found in the very terms chosen by David for his many descriptions of Uriah; the emphasis being on physical characteristics. It has been noted that in describing Uriah David appropriates medical discourse. William Acton's description of a boy who habitually masturbates, quoted in Steven Marcus' The Other Victorians should provide ample evidence for this charge:

> The frame is stunted and weak, the muscles undeveloped, the eye is sunken and heavy, the complexion is sallow, pasty, or covered with spots of acne, the hands are damp and cold, and the skin moist. The boy shuns the society of others, creeps about alone, joins with repugnance in the amusements of his schoolfellows. He cannot look anyone in the face, and becomes careless in dress and uncleanly in person. His intellect has become sluggish and enfeebled, and if his evil habits are persisted in, he may end by becoming a drivelling idiot or a peevish valetudinarian. Such boys are to be seen in all stages of degeneration, but what we have described is but the result towards which they all are tending. (19)

Despite the fact that Uriah can in no way be said to be of a sluggish and enfeebled intellect, or to be slovenly in his personal habits, much of the information that we are presented with in David's first description of him supports Marcus' assertion that "masturbation was unquestionably at the bottom of all of Uriah Heep's troubles" (19). He is"cadaverous", "high-shouldered and bony" and has a "long, lank, skeleton hand" (375) which we already know to be cold and clammy to the touch. In addition, he looks "much older" than his fifteen years (375).

Uriah Heep is undoubtedly characterised as being deviant, and the deviance, according to David at least, is related to his sexuality. Evidence for this can be found throughout David's account of his history in the very language he uses, not only to describe Uriah's appearance, but also to relate his own responses to the threat that he sees Uriah as posing. He states that he had a "delirious idea of seizing the red-hot poker out of the fire, and running him through with it" and that Uriah "seemed to swell and grow before my eyes" (441). The sexual imagery in these references has not escaped critics' attention.

To be fair to Uriah, however, and assuming that there are two sides to every story, it has to be recognised that this is a striking example within the novel of the nature of autobiography; the effect of writing a life in retrospect. Looking back David *knows* what threat Uriah posed in aspiring to a union with Agnes. It has to be acknowledged that Uriah's odiousness has probably grown out of all proportion in David's memory. For if one thing is admitted by David it is his shock at discovering Uriah's intentions regarding Agnes. He relates the entire incident surrounding Uriah's disclosures in a way that suggests near loss of consciousness. His vision of Uriah, "sitting all awry" made him giddy, "the room seemed full of echoes" and it is only the image of Agnes that enables him to affect an "appearance of composure". Even his conversational powers he describes as being effectually "scattered".

This is not the reaction of a man who had forseen a threat and, because of this, any belief we may have had in David's instant recognition of Uriah's qualities has to be questioned. It is much later that he sees the threat, and having then identified it as a sexual one he rewrites his memories as a member of the middle class, and chooses the appropriate discourse with which to relate them.

The real threat that Uriah poses to David, of course, stretches far beyond his "pure affection" for Agnes. Uriah is a threat to the middle class in that, through 'umbleness, he hopes to become a respectable member of it. His marriage to Agnes would have merely been the icing on the cake of his economic advancement just as it becomes so in reality for David. It has to be asked whether there is anything intrinsically wrong with his intentions regarding Agnes when we examine the terms in which he expresses them:

> "There's no hurry at present, you know, Master Copperfield . . . My Agnes is very young still; and mother and me will have to work our way upwards, and make a good many new arrangements, before it would be quite convenient. So I shall have time gradually to make her familiar with my hopes, as opportunities offer." (442)

Presumably, Uriah's arrangements would include the acquisition of several useless items of furniture; endearing in Traddles perhaps but not in Uriah. Nevertheless, it is marriage he desires and not seduction as David continually seems to suggest.

It is interesting to note that as a child, not yet firmly entrenched in the middle class, David records no disgust at the idea of Uriah advancing in the world. Rather, he takes as read the fact that after all his hard work he will be a "regular lawyer" (291). It is, in fact, David who first proffers the suggestion to Uriah that he may become a partner in Mr Wickfield's business, "and it will be Wickfield and Heep, or Heep late Wickfield" (291). He professes later, of course, to having done it "only to make myself agreeable" (291). David's and Uriah's early conversations suggest an identity in terms of ambition, each competing with the other for some unseen prize for humbleness. Uriah states that he is "much too umble" to consider advancement to partnership and so too does David when it is suggested that he could have the same ambition: "I protested that I had no views of that sort, and that no such scheme was entertained in my behalf by anybody" (293).

The essential difference between David and Uriah is the fact that David *has* somebody to entertain schemes on his account; this somebody being Aunt Betsey. It is interesting, too, to note that Aunt Betsey is the one other person who speaks out against Uriah with absolute passion when even his supposed victim does not. Agnes, in fact, actually entreats David to be friendly to Uriah: "'Don't repel him. Don't resent (as I think you have a general disposition to do) what may be uncongenial to you in him. He may not deserve it, for we know no certain ill of him.'" (430)

David's success and admission to the middle class can then be seen as the primary cause of his hatred for Uriah and the change in his attitude towards the latter's getting on in the world. For though David knows no ill of Uriah he is disgusted when Agnes speaks of partnership with her father as appearing inevitable:

> "What? Uriah? That mean, fawning fellow, worm himself into such promotion!" I cried indignantly. "Have you made no remonstrance about it, Agnes? Consider what a connexion it is likely to be. You must speak out. You must not allow your father to take such a mad step. You must prevent it, Agnes, while there's time." (428)

What has to be seen as Uriah's rise to the middle class is blocked of course. Because of his material success he is brought down by several reputable members of the middle-class, including David, for being little more than an opportunist. He is, it should be noted, accused of no sexual crime. He is, indeed, accused of no crime at all. It must give David immense satisfaction to be able to communicate through the prison episode at the end of his narrative that Uriah had been incarcerated for "fraud, forgery, and conspiracy" (929). Knowledge of these later crimes must provide justification for David's earlier treatment of him which, otherwise, might have been lacking.

However one regards Uriah Heep there is no doubt in David's mind or, in fact, in the minds of most readers of the novel that Uriah is entirely villainous. Yet, even if we are convinced of the rightness of David's assessment it is clear that even the villains in this narrative need not take full responsibility for the crimes they commit. Murdstone may be cruel and sadistic but it is Clara Copperfield herself who is attracted by him and who invites the consequences of having a relationship based purely on sexual attraction. Equally, Steerforth may lack any sound morality but it is Emily who agrees to become his mistress. Likewise, Uriah may be, in Victorian terms, a sexual deviant and as such he may pose a threat to Agnes but his power is not innate. It has been invested in him by Agnes' father and, I hope to prove, by Agnes herself. Uriah, as I have stated previously, is, above all, an opportunist. His power is created and nourished by weakness in others; a fact that does not go unnoticed by Agnes:

> "Uriah has made himself indespensable to papa. He is subtle and watchful. He has mastered papa's weaknesses, fostered them, and taken advantage of them, until - to say all I mean in a word, Trotwood,- until papa is afraid of him." (429)

David's response to the above admission is as significant as the admission itself:

> There was more that she might have said; more that she knew, or that she suspected; I clearly saw. I could not give her pain by asking what it was, for I knew that she withheld it from me, to spare her father. It had been going on to this, I was sensible: yes, I could not but feel, on the least reflection, that it had been going on to this for a long time. (429)

Agnes' reticence in telling David more regarding her father's weaknesses may indeed have been due to her desire to protect him but there is evidence to support the theory that she is also protecting herself. For it is *she* who is his greatest weakness. The flaw within the Wickfield home is the love between Agnes and her father, a love that Mr Wickfield later describes as being, on his side at least, "sordid" and "diseased" (642-643).

Evidence relating to the nature of Agnes' relationship with her father is provided in the first descriptions of Agnes, all of which have been previously quoted. Her striking resemblance to her dead mother and her housewifely role alike emphasise that she is, to her father, more than a daughter. The role she plays is, in fact, that of a wife. She sits "opposite to him at table" and David doubts "whether he could have dined without her" (281). She serves his every whim, including that of being provider of the alcohol, which is his other weakness, and David considers that "he would have missed its usual flavour, if it had been put there for him by any other hands" (281). On one occasion David observes her wishing her father goodnight and states that "he took her in his arms and kissed her", the expression of which action appears to suggest the relationship of a lover and certainly not a father.

The relationship of Agnes and her father is further highlighted by the account which runs parallel to it in the narrative, that of the history of Dr and Mrs Strong. While the Strongs' domestic cell can stand on its own within the narrative and be shown to conform to the pattern illustrated within other domestic cells it is most useful when examined and compared with that of the Wickfields; for Agnes and

Annie Strong are contemporaries and their relationships with the older men in their lives contain the same flaws, though they are inverted.

David's first meeting with Annie and her husband occurs only a day following his first meeting with the Wickfields and he immediately misinterprets the nature of their relationship:

> But, sitting at work, not far from Doctor Strong, was a very pretty young lady- whom he called Annie, and who was his daughter, I supposed- who got me out of my difficulty by kneeling down to put Doctor Strong's shoes on, and button his gaitoers, which she did with great cheerfulness and quickness. When she had finished, and we were going out to the schoolroom, I was much surprised to hear Mr Wickfield, in bidding her good morning, address her as 'Mrs Strong'; and I was wondering could she be Doctor Strong's son's wife, or could she be Mrs Doctor Strong, when Doctor Strong himself unconsciously enlightened me. (282-283)

This misinterpretaion is, however, hardly surprising when one considers his recent meeting with the Wickfields. In fact, if the meetings had been reversed it is more than likely that he would have assumed that Agnes and her father were husband and wife. This fact aside, even after realising his initial mistake David insists on presenting the Strongs' marriage as if it were no marriage but merely the father-daughter relationship that he first assumed it to be:

> It was very pleasant to see the Doctor with his pretty young wife. He had a fatherly benignant way of showiing his fondness for her, which seemed in itself to express a good man. I often saw them walking in the garden where the peaches were, and I sometimes had a nearer observation of them in the study or the parlour. She appeared to take great care of the Doctor, and to like him very much, though I never thought her vitally interested in the Dictionary. (295)

His early evaluation of the Strongs' relationship makes it very difficult to accept that these two are successful "life-partners". It may, indeed, be pleasant for David to witness them together but this is more than likely due to Annie's prettiness and youth, indicated in the above passage and reinforced in later descriptions in which we hear of, among other attributes, her "dress of white, with cherry-coloured ribbons" (296) and her "blooming and flower-like complexion" (296). Nor is

David always content with referring to her as pretty, for at one point he describes her as looking "very pretty, wonderfully pretty". The novel's illustrations confirm that she is ringleted and, in fact, very much in the style of Dora Spenlow and Clara Copperfield and the same comparison can be made between her and Agnes as has been made between Agnes and these other child-wives: "Agnes is said to be as beautiful as Dora, but the sense the novel leaves is that Dora, like Clara Copperfield, is lovely and ringleted, and Agnes is lovely and practical" (Manning 73).

It is Annie's wonderful girlish prettiness that is the premise for the deception that occurs surrounding her character, for in this novel such a quality is a negative attribute in that it indicates sexuality. Because of Annie's unquestioned attractiveness we are led to believe that she is unfulfilled in her relationship with her husband and that she has found this fulfilment elsewhere, in a relationship with her cousin, Jack Maldon. This deception is fed by David's comments regarding her relationship with her husband; in saying that Dr Strong treats her as a daughter, that she appeared to *like* him only and that she was not "vitally interested" in his dictionary David is undermining the basis of a relationship that is questioned anyway, simply because of the disparity in their ages. When we have superimposed on this the image of Agnes with her keys hanging at her side and with her staid housewifely demeanour it is Annie who appears inadequate and out of place, and not Agnes. We sense that it is somehow inappropriate for Annie to be "running gaily across the cathedral yard" with David (295-296). Her youthful attitudes and her general attractiveness argue that she is rejecting her true role of wife.

But what happens to our image of Agnes when we discover that Annie is, in fact, innocent of all the crimes of which she has been suspected; and, indeed, what happens to our impression of her father? We, as readers, are surely forced into a

position of having to re-evaluate their relationship with each other and their respective relationships with Annie.

Prior to the unfolding of the narrative relating to Annie's troubles we are given a strong indication of her relationship with Mr Wickfield. When commenting on her frequent visits at the Wickfield home David states the following:

> There was a curious constraint between her and Mr Wickfield, I thought (of whom she seemed to be afraid), that never wore off. When she came there of an evening, she always shrunk from accepting his escort home, and ran away with me instead. (296)

What we may have interpreted as Mr Wickfield's apparent well-founded suspicion of Annie coupled with a healthy protective attitude towards the moral well-being of his daughter changes at the moment of her profession of love for her husband. At this point Mr Wickfield can be viewed as little better than dirty-minded because his suspicions regarding her actions and motives were in his mind and not based in any reality. In addition, Annie's fear of Mr Wickfield must come under scrutiny when we discover that she had no idea of his suspicions regarding her character until well after the time of David's statement highlighting the "constraint" between them. It is the night of Jack Maldon's departure for India that she identifies as the moment when she first "saw a double meaning . . . in Mr Wickfield's scrutiny of me" (730).

Perhaps we should inquire as to the original meaning that Annie had seen in Mr Wickfield's scrutiny of her. Perhaps we should wonder at her fear of him and the fact that it "never wore off" (296). Perhaps we should also inquire as to her frequent visits to Agnes. It is always assumed that Agnes counsels Annie; that it is Agnes who has the more to offer in this friendship. It is possible, however, to conclude that the situation is reversed; that Annie is in a position to counsel Agnes. If we do, in fact, come to this conclusion then we could consider the possibility that Mr Wickfield's scrutiny of Annie and her fear of him was based on her sense of his relationship with his daughter.

"Oh, my husband and father . . . " (724); so Annie begins her confession, and so too might Agnes begin hers. For if Annie's and Agnes' domestic relationships are initially presented as inversions of each other so they remain, in the sense that only one can be "unflawed" at any one time. Annie's suspected flaws are initially highlighted by Agnes' perfection but eventually the reverse happens in that the disease in Agnes' relationship with her father is highlighted by Annie's return to respectability. The fact is that these two "marriages" are identical in their presentation.

The timing of Mr Wickfield's confession regarding his relationship with Agnes is notable in that it stresses the connection between this relationship and Uriah's increasing power in the household. It is, in fact, as a direct result of a thinly-veiled threat by Uriah that Mr Wickfield breaks down: "'Why shouldn't you be in all the world's power, Mr Wickfield? Because you have a daughter. You and me know what we know, don't we? Let sleeping dogs lie - who wants to rouse em?'" (642). It is more than clear that Uriah is aware of Mr Wickfield's weaknesses, and is taking advantage of them as Agnes had earlier suspected. It is also clear that the flaw in this household is a particularly threatening one; threatening enough to the Wickfields' respectability for everyone to want to keep it quiet, including David. What is particularly interesting at this point in the narrative, however, is Agnes' silent admission of knowledge:

> The door opened, and Agnes, gliding in, without a vestige of colour in her face, put her arm round his neck, and steadily said, "Papa, you are not well. Come with me!" He laid his head upon her shoulder, as if he were oppressed with heavy shame, and went out with her. Her eyes met mine for but an instant, yet I saw how much she knew of what had passed. (643)

This is not, of course, the first time that we are made aware of Agnes' knowledge regarding her father's situation. She had previously stated that she felt responsible for the state of affairs in her home: "'If I could ever set this right! If I could work out his restoration, as I have so innocently been the cause of his decline!'" (430).

But how innocent can we regard Agnes as being when she has been seen from the beginning to reinforce her father's behaviour? She saw fit very early on to assume the completely inappropriate role of wife for him. Even after his confession she continues in this role, blocking any attempt at self-recognition on his part by informing him that he is "not well". Wife or daughter, one thing is clear; for all her placidity, Agnes is a more powerful individual than her father. While she is not responsible for the eventual turnaround in the affairs of her household she is at least partly responsible for their initial decline. Her father's diseased love would not have been possible without her acquiescence. And, having acquiesced, she did all in her power to stop the situation being resolved, apparently because she saw the road to recovery as lying in self-sacrifice but, more likely, because she was concerned for her own reputation. It was Agnes who pushed her father to agree to a partnership with Uriah: "I did what I hope was right. Feeling sure that it was necessary for papa's peace that the sacrifice should be made, I entreated him to make it." (444).

As victim, therefore, Agnes is little different from her predecessors except inasmuch as she has David to shield and defend her. This he must do for the same reasons that he must shield and defend himself in his narrative: Agnes' perfection is required in order for David to validate his position in a way that Emily's and his mother's were not. To this end she remains unscarred and unmarked, "true", "beautiful", and "good", while those around her are punished; Uriah through having any possibility of future advancement removed and Mr Wickfield through first becoming a mere "shadow" of his former self (914) and then by being eliminated from the narrative altogether. He remains long enough to speak out for Agnes' innocence and goodness and is, then, never heard of again; in the novel's final retrospect he is one of the few characters who do not merit a mention. We must assume that there are some things that David Copperfield, and his angelic wife, would prefer to forget.

London

The three previous chapters of this thesis have involved examinations of self-contained domestic cells in Blunderstone, Yarmouth and Canterbury respectively. Of these three settings the cell of Canterbury is undoubtedly the most important, primarily because of the presence of Agnes, the woman whom Dickens described as the "real heroine" in this novel and whom David considers to have had the most influence on his life and, therefore, on his writing. David outlines her importance in this regard quite explicitly:

> However loud the general voice might be in giving me encouragement, and however fervent the emotions and endeavours to which it roused me, I heard her lightest word of praise as I heard nothing else . . . When I read to Agnes what I wrote; when I saw her listening face; moved her to smiles or tears; and heard her cordial voice so earnest on the shadowy events of that imaginative world in which I lived; I thought . . . what I could have wished my wife to be. (930-931)

His comments cannot be ignored, despite the fact that he makes a point of distinguishing this work from his "own fictions" - "They express themselves, and I leave them to themselves." (758)[1] - for Agnes is, after all, beside him as he closes this account and we can assume, from his comments, that she has been beside him throughout its rendering. Her power, therefore, cannot be underestimated. She may be a quiet influence but an influence she is nonetheless; and, it may be added, with good cause. Without her "dear presence" David believes he would be nothing but, without a doubt, but for David's literary reinforcement of her character she would be significantly less than she appears to be. Thus, while David has the power to validate his own position in society through the rendering of this narrative it is a power that is controlled by the very position which he has attained; and Agnes must be recognised as having no small part in the directing and forming of David's narrative. For the domestic ideal which they inhabit, the sexual norm which they exemplify, belongs to them both; and it is David's responsibility to ensure that it withstands scrutiny.

It does withstand scrutiny, of course, inasmuch as it is never exposed to it, for David confines his detailed observations to events of the past. When it comes to his present he grants himself the privilege of privacy. As readers we do not even know his true identity until near the narrative's close. To us he is David Copperfield of Blunderstone Rookery, a title that can be seen as a deliberate attempt on his part to disguise his position.[2] As he states towards the end of his narrative:

> I have made it, thus far, with no purpose of suppressing any of my thoughts; for, as I have elsewhere said, this narrative is my written memory. I have desired to keep the most secret current of my mind apart, and to the last. I enter on it now. (889)

The most secret current of David's mind is, in fact, the most important in terms of our understanding of this narrative.

It is an important point, therefore, and one that I have stressed elsewhere, that David's retrospective observations are made from London, the city in which he and Agnes reside. For this reason London must be viewed as being the centre of the novel, as it is the centre of David's panoptic structure. It is from this hidden position that he carries out his observations of the surrounding cells of the narrative, those contained within Blunderstone, Yarmouth, Canterbury and Dover.

When we consider the nature of these various geographic locations the extent of London's centrality in the narrative comes into even sharper focus. London has a "presence" in the novel which is not shared with any of the other "cells" which come under David's watchful eye. This is in part because it is the least peripheral location, in terms of geographic importance, but also because it is the least self-contained in terms of the narrative as a whole. London permeates the entire narrative in terms of the experiences of its inhabitants and particularly (though not exclusively) the experiences of David. It is to London that the child David is sent to work following the death of his mother, and it is from thence that he moves in order to make "another beginning" under the guidance of Betsey Trotwood, only to return to pursue his chosen career.[3] It is in London, too, that he meets and marries Dora

and it is here that he renews his dangerous acquaintance with Steerforth. London is, in fact, the scene of his darkest hours and his most threatening moments.

This latter vision of London is consistent with Dickens' usual presentation of this city; a place of decadence and pollution; a threatening place. And while this point appears to be contradicted somewhat by the fact that in this narrative London is also the setting for David's success, there is, in fact, no contradiction in this. Because of their middle-class status and their domestic respectability David and Agnes are protected from the threatening aspect of the city. They are beyond pollution, just as they are beyond scrutiny.

This is not the case with David's younger self, however, and it is on his uncomfortable past, lived within the confines of this polluted city, that I intend concentrating for the greater part of this chapter. For it is in his examination of two of the most important individuals in his life, and the domestic "cells" associated with them, that his true character is the most "exposed". It is in London that we can observe his experiences to the greatest extent, even while he is observing and, of course, categorising others.

The relationship between David and Steerforth has to be regarded as one of the most important in David's experience simply because of the emphasis that he places on it in his narrative. It stands alone in terms of the effect that it has on him emotionally, as becomes evident when he nears the point of having to relate the details of Steerforth's death:

> I now approach an event in my life, so indelible, so awful, so bound by an infinite variety of ties to all that has preceded it, in these pages, that, from the beginning of my narrative, I have seen it growing larger and larger as I advanced, like a great tower in a plain, and throwing its fore-cast shadow even on the incidents of my childish days.
>
> For years after it occurred, I dreamed of it often. I have started up so vividly impressed by it, that its fury has yet seemed raging in my quiet room, in the still night. I dream of it sometimes, though at lengthened and uncertain intervals, to this hour. I have an association between it and a stormy wind, or the lightest mention of a sea-shore, as strong as any of which my mind is conscious. As plainly as I behold what happened, I will try to write it down. I do not recall it, but see it done; for it happens again before me. (854-855)

Despite all of his faults, and they are numerous, David appears to have been more affected by Steerforth's death than he has been by any other single event in his life, not even excepting the deaths of his mother and Dora. It is an event that continues to haunt his dreams and, indeed, his waking hours, if we are to believe the extent of his dread at the prospect of having to record it. It is, in fact, difficult to distinguish between David's horror at the actual event of Steerforth's death and his horror at having to narrate the circumstances surrounding it; and, for this reason, it is possible to conclude that David's grief is born of discomfort, that he is affected by Steerforth's death not despite the latter's faults but because of them.

The reality of Steerforth's faults is without a doubt an issue that it is difficult for David to address; one, in fact, that he does not address. With Steerforth's death David literally buries, or attempts to bury, any recollection of his friend's false

nature: "no need to have said, 'Think of me at my best!' I had done that ever; and could I change now, looking on this sight!" (866).

How could David change, indeed? For, to do so would be to acknowledge his own part in Steerforth's tragedy, his own guilt at having knowingly associated with one who was early recognised by Agnes as being his "bad angel" (426) and a "dangerous friend" (427). It is much safer, indeed, to mourn for one who "might have won the love and admiration of thousands" (886) than to mourn for one who squandered the love and admiration of a few.

The fact that David makes such an effort to deny the reality of his relationship with Steerforth makes it an irrisistible focus for discussion. It is first necessary, however, to have some understanding of what Steerforth, and, indeed, his family, represent in this narrative.

The Steerforth family are presented as if they were members of the aristocracy; not that we know them to be members of this class but as Chris R. Vanden Bossche states, their "attitudes, along with their style of living, cause us, like David, to associate them with the aristocracy even though they apparently possess no titles" (92).

As with all of the domestic cells to which we are introduced by David our first knowledge of its inhabitants comes through a description of a dwelling; within "the old brick house at Highgate on the summit of the hill" (349) David discovers the following:

> It was a genteel old-fashioned house, very quiet and from the windows of my room I saw all London lying in the distance like a great vapour, with here and there some lights twinkling through it. I had only time, in dressing, to glance at the solid furniture, the framed pieces of work (done, I supposed, by Steerforth's mother when she was a girl), and some pictures in crayons of ladies with powdered hair and boddices, coming and going on the walls, as the newly-kindled fire crackled and sputtered, when I was called to dinner. (350)

Everything in the Steerforth home suggests an ancient lineage, a class permanency that David has not previously encountered; the solid furniture and portrait-covered

walls indicate that this family has been born into gentility. The position of their home also indicates a certain quality of power. Situated on a hill, the home affords a view of everything around, a view not dissimilar from that which David has within his narrative.[4]

The Steerforth world is one that David, by his own account, feels privileged to enter - "I could hardly believe but that I was in a dream" (349) - for it is a world of gentility, wealth and, above all, power. These are, of course, all things that David admires and aspires to, but at the point of his meeting with his boyhood patron's family, they are still well out of reach. There is no doubt, however, that he is aware that through a continuing association with James Steerforth in particular, some of this influence may rub off. He has, after all, experienced its positive effects as recently as one day prior to his visit to Steerforth's family home:

> I could not enough admire the change he had wrought in the Golden Cross; or compare the dull forlorn state I had held yesterday, with this morning's comfort and this morning's entertainment. As to the waiter's familiarity, it was quenched as if it had never been. He attended on us, as I may say, in sackcloth and ashes. (348)

As a resident of the Golden Cross hotel David has risen from complete nonentity - "Why, you see we wasn't aware, sir, as Mr Copperfield was anyways particular" (347) - to being deserving of a room with a bed "which was quite a little landed estate" (347); and he makes this transition because Steerforth demands it. The most important point about this episode, however, is that David recognises the role that Steerforth is playing in their relationship, and likes it. He does not even appear concerned when Steerforth states that "I feel as if you were my property" (348) but, instead, describes himself as "glowing with pleasure to find that he had still this interest in me" (348).

What most attracts David to Steerforth is the former's perception of him as a gentleman and it is, in part, through an examination of the concept of gentlemanliness that we can get to the heart of the essential flaws in Steerforth's

character and, indeed, in the characters of his family. In The Idea of the Gentleman in the Victorian Novel Robin Gilmour states that in the years from 1840 to around 1880 the "nature of gentlemanliness was more anxiously debated and more variously defined than at any time before or since." (3). He outlines the fundamental nature of this debate thus:

> The idea of the gentleman could never have fascinated the Victorians as it did if it had been limited by caste or by a strict science of heraldry, nor, on the other hand, if it had been a totally moralised concept, a mere synonym for the good man. It was the subtle and shifting balance between social and moral attributes that gave gentlemanliness its fascination, the sense - it is perhaps what we mean by that elusive quality "charm"- that in the perfect gentleman a habitual moral considerateness has been translated into such grace of manner that, as Hopkins said . . . "to be a gentleman is but on the brim of morals and rather a thing of manners than of morals properly". By the mid-century, however, the moral element was generally acknowledged to be in the ascendant. (4)

It is this moral element that is shown to be so severely lacking in Steerforth. His good birth can go unquestioned and, if we are to believe David, he is certainly charming. In his account of Steerforth's visit to Peggotty and Barkis David writes as follows:

> . . . his easy, spirited good humour; his genial manner, his handsome looks, his natural gift of adapting himself to whomsoever he pleased, and making direct, when he cared to do it, to the main point of interest in anybody's heart; bound her to him wholly in five minutes . . . There was no noise, no effort, no consciousness, in anything he did; but in everything an indescribable lightness, a seeming impossibility of doing anything else, or doing anything better, which was so graceful, so natural and agreeable, that it overcomes me, even now, in the remembrance. (367-368)

This particular description of Steerforth's attributes is entirely consistent with all of David's accounts of him and not just because of its effusiveness; for behind David's gushing commentary lurks some indication of the shallowness of Steerforth's being. He does "what he cares to do" and nothing more and in everything there is a lightness, a lack of effort, a lack of discipline. Steerforth does

what he likes with whom he pleases and with no thought of anything beyond self-gratification.

"It was not a fit school generally for my son" (354) says Mrs Steerforth of Salem House and in her comments to follow regarding her son's education we see the origin of his attitudes:

> "My son's high spirit made it desirable that he should be placed with some man who felt its superiority, and would be content to bow himself before it; and we found such a man there . . . My son's great capacity was tempted on, there, by a feeling of voluntary emulation and conscious pride . . . He would have risen against all constraint; but he found himself the monarch of the place, and he haughtily determined to be worthy of his station . . . So my son took, of his own will, and on no compulsion, to the course in which he can always, when it is his pleasure, outstrip every competitor." (354)

Steerforth has been raised to believe in his own superiority and his superiority has been accepted by those with whom he has come into contact; not the least of whom is David. It is no wonder that Steerforth feels "an unusual friendship for him" (355), or that David believes himself to be "nearer to his heart than any other friend" (359) for it is David who continues to bow down before him, just as he once did at school: "This treasure, as in duty bound, I laid at the feet of Steerforth." (145). Likewise, it is David who continues most strongly to reinforce Steerforth's misplaced feelings of superiority. He is seduced by Steerforth's charms but can also be viewed as prostituting himself to them; particularly if one accepts that he has some knowledge of Steerforth's true character.

In David's first associations with Steerforth, during his short-lived schooldays, he could perhaps be forgiven for exhibiting a certain naivity with regard to Steerforth's character, owing to his extreme youth and relative inexperience. To be accepted as a friend by such an altogether "superior" member of the establishment must have made him "glow with pleasure" indeed. Yet, there is no doubt that even at this point part of the pleasure that he derived from Steerforth's friendship was due to the fact that Steerforth "protected" him at a time

when he was particularly vulnerable. Steerforth proves to be, in David's words, "a very useful friend; since nobody dared to annoy one whom he honoured with his countenance" (144).

Despite Steerforth's blatant snobbery, his constant abuse of power and his generally dishonourable conduct, therefore, it is only to be expected that David will stand by him, since "to disappoint or to displease Steerforth was of course out of the question" (145). It is interesting, however, that he never fully admits that his allegiance is governed by self-interest. For, while stating that he was "no loser by the transaction" he immediately adds:

> Let me do myself justice, however. I was moved by no interested or selfish motive, nor was I moved by fear of him. I admired and loved him, and his approval was return enough. It was so precious to me that I look back on these trifles, now, with an aching heart. (145)

While David the child can be forgiven for his adulation of, and allegiance to, Steerforth, it is more difficult to accept it of him as an adult. In his account of his visit to Steerforth's home he relates several conversations in which the latter's true character is, once and for all, revealed, but with each revelation David goes out of his way either to defend or to validate Steerforth's position. Most notable of these revelations is a conversation pertaining to the Peggottys in which Steerforth's complete disregard for those he considers his social inferiors becomes evident:

> "Why, there's a pretty wide separation between them and us," said Steerforth, with indifference. "They are not to be expected to be as sensitive as we are. Their delicacy is not to be shocked, or hurt easily. They are wonderfully virtuous, I dare say - some people contend for that, at least; and I am sure I don't want to contradict them - but they have not very fine natures, and they may be thankful that, like their coarse rough skins, they are not easily wounded." (352)

That David does not jump to the Peggotty's defence in such company is understandable, but only if one accepts the extent of his desire to gain from an association with the Steerforths. In reality Steerforth can offer him far more than the Peggottys ever could and David is, therefore, prepared to turn a blind eye to the

former's moral decrepitude and dismiss his comments as having been "made in jest" (352).

That Steerforth's true character is so tellingly revealed during a conversation relating to the Peggottys is significant considering that it is they who eventually fall victim both to his charm and his sense of superiority; for it is a combination of these two elements that result in his elopement with and seduction of Emily. Setting Emily's own guilt aside for the moment, it becomes clear that Steerforth's relationship with her comes as a direct result of an upbringing that has taught him little regard for others and particularly for those below his station who are not "easily wounded". And such is Emily; as a pretty country girl, she is claimed by Steerforth as of right. As Rosa Dartle states, Emily is to them no more than "a part of the trade of your home . . . bought and sold like any other vendible thing your people dealt in" (788).

And what of Steerforth's charm, the attribute that David appears to see as his saving grace? It is, in fact, this very charm that makes his acquisition of Emily possible: "If you live in his home and know him, you know, perhaps, what his power with a weak, vain girl might be . . . he used all his power to deceive me, and . . . I believed him, trusted him, and loved him!" (788). Rather than being a gentlemanly attribute, it is exposed as being little more than a tool for the execution of immoral acts.

Steerforth's seduction of Emily can thus be seen as both a sexual and a class crime, and it is for this reason that not only he suffers for it. For just as the entire Peggotty family is implicated in Emily's downfall, and subsequently marginalised, so too is the entire Steerforth family implicated in Steerforth's guilt. To treat the story of Emily and Steerforth, therefore, as if it relates only to two individuals is to ignore a whole dimension in the presentation of their respective families. For, as Mary-Anne Andrade points out, these two homes represent a complete inversion of each other:

> What is light in the Peggotty home is dark in the Steerforth home - everything is reversed: the Peggotty home is poor, the Steerforth home upper-middle class; Mr Peggotty is the patriarch devoted to the orphaned daughter, Mrs Steerforth is the matriarch devoted to the semiorphaned son; Ham is in love with Emily, Rosa Dartle is in love with Steerforth, both pairs having been raised together as children; Steerforth disrupts the Peggotty home, Emily disrupts the Steerforth home; Mr Peggotty and Ham feel animosity towards Steerforth who is referred to as a pollutor, Mrs Steerforth and Rosa feel animosity towards Emily whom Rosa refers to as a "piece of pollution"; Mr Peggotty speaks only of his responsibility to Emily, never of hers to him, Mrs Steerforth speaks only of her son's responsibility to her. (67)[5]

What is not inverted in these two homes, however, is a dark sexuality, evidence for which exists long before Emily's and Steerforth's elopement. There is no question that Mrs Steerforth's love for her son surpasses common maternal feeling. Despite David's early assertion that "It was no wonder to me to find Mrs Steerforth devoted to her son" (353) it is difficult to accept the extent of her devotion, just as it is difficult to accept Peggotty's extreme adoration of his niece:

> She seemed to be able to speak or think about nothing else. She showed me his picture as an infant, in a locket, with some of his baby-hair in it; she showed me his picture as he had been when I first knew him; and she wore at her breast his picture as he was now. All the letters he had ever written to her, she kept in a cabinet near her own chair by the fire; and she would have read me some of them, and I should have been very glad to hear them too, if he had not interposed, and coaxed her out of her design. (353-354)

Mrs Steerforth is completely obsessed with "her dear James" and this obsession encompasses the sexual. Symbolic of this is the fact that her relationship with him definitely extends beyond the drawing-room. David's descriptions of this home may begin with impressions of its exterior but it is with his later descriptions of its inhabitants' more private space that he begins, unwittingly, perhaps, to reveal the truth regarding their relationships and their natures:

> Steerforth's room was next to mine, and I went in to look at it. It was a picture of comfort, full of easy-chairs, cushions and footstools, worked by his mother's hand, and with no sort of thing omitted that could help to render it complete. Finally her handsome features looked down on her darling from a portrait on the wall, as if it were even something to her that her likeness should watch him while he slept. (355)

David has no need to state explicitly the perversity of her love in order for us to recognize it; and any reservations we may have about making such a judgement must surely disappear once it is discovered that following Steerforth's elopement with Emily she has taken to occupying the room in which her influence and presence had previously only been implied. David writes:

> I felt, of course, that she had taken to occupy it, in remembrance of him; and that the many tokens of his old sports and accomplishments, by which she was surrounded, remained there, just as he had left them, for the same reason. She murmured, however, even in her reception of me, that she was out of her own chamber because its aspect was unsuited to her infirmity; and with her stately look repelled the least suspicion of the truth. (868)

Though David claims to reveal the truth he does not appear fully to grasp it. For despite the fact that he has earlier recognised that the Steerforth home is now "a waste, a ruin" (528) he does not appear to recognize that such it has always been; that its nature is not changed but, rather, exposed. Any vestige of respectability has left it. The drawing-room which David recalls as having had a "pleasant air of occupation" is now dark and desolate. In fact, rather than simply choosing to occupy her son's room in remembrance of him Mrs Steerforth can be viewed as having given in to the reality of her desire, just as Rosa Dartle had done before her:

> There was a second lady in the dining-room, of a slight short figure, dark, and not agreeable to look at . . . who attracted my attention: perhaps because I had not expected to see her; perhaps because I found myself sitting opposite to her; perhaps because of something really remarkable in her. She had black hair and eager black eyes, and was thin and had a scar upon her lip. It was an old scar - I should rather call it seam, for it was not discoloured, and had healed years ago - which had once cut through her mouth, downward towards the chin, but was now barely visible across the table, except above and on her upper lip, the shape of which it had altered . . .She was a little dilapidated - like a house - with having been so long to let; yet.had . . . an appearance of good looks. Her thinness seemed to be the effect of some wasting fire within her, which found a vent in her gaunt eyes. (350)

The "wasting fire" within Rosa Dartle is, of course, passion; a passion that is sexual in nature and stems from her relationship with Steerforth. More than any

other in the narrative, perhaps, Rosa can be classed as a victim. Taken in by Mrs Steerforth as a companion on the death of her father she has been condemned to a life of social isolation. Not having been raised as a true member of the family she cannot claim the status of the Steerforths; and though she has money of her own she is still no more than a glorified servant. "I concluded in my own mind" says David "that she wished to be married" (350), a conclusion that he no doubt reaches because of her own revelation of this fact. "I could have loved him", Rosa says of Steerforth, "and asked no return. If I had been his wife, I could have been the slave of his caprices for a word of love a year. I should have been." (871).

Rosa Dartle, of course, was never destined to be Steerforth's wife. It can, in fact, be supposed that any suggested union between the two would have been equally as derided by Mrs Steerforth as the proposal that her son should marry Emily: "It is impossible. He would disgrace himself . . . she is far below him . . . Such a marriage would irretrievably blight my son's career, and ruin his prospects." (529-530). Yet a union of sorts has taken place between Steerforth and Rosa, as we learn from her vehement attack on Mrs Steerforth following his death:

> "When he was freshest and truest, he loved me. Yes, he did! Many a time, when you were put off with a slight word, he has taken Me to his heart!"
>
> She said it with a taunting pride in the midst of her frenzy - for it was little less - yet with an eager remembrance of it, in which the smouldering embers of a gentler feeling kindled for the moment.
>
> "I descended - as I might have known I should, but that he fascinated me with his boyish courtship - into a doll, a trifle for the occupation of an idle hour, to be dropped, and taken up, and trifled with, as the inconstant humour took him. When he grew weary, I grew weary. As his fancy died out, I would no more have tried to strengthen any power I had, than I would have married him on his being forced to take me for his wife. We fell away from one another without a word. Perhaps you saw it, and were not sorry. Since then, I have been a mere disfigured piece of furniture between you both; having no eyes, no ears, no feelings, no remembrances. Moan? Moan for what you made him; not for your love. I tell you that the time was, when I loved him better than you ever did!" (872)

While it is not stated explicitly that theirs was a sexual relationship the language that Rosa uses suggests it. That she "descended" alone says much but her reference to her disfigurement says much more. The scar caused through an altercation with Steerforth during their childhood seems to suggest far more than a wound inflicted by a mere hammer. As Michael Slater notes:

> Even the least sophisticated reader can hardly miss the symbolic significance of the disfiguring scar on her face caused by Steerforth's throwing a hammer at her when he was a boy (and the more sophisticated can, I suppose, read what phallic meaning they wish into the detail). Steerforth has damaged her for life. (266)

Evidence that David is one of the more sophisticated "readers" of Rosa's disfigurement can be found in his general fascination with her person, but particularly with her scar:

> I could not help glancing at the scar with painful interest when we went in to tea. It was not long before I observed that it was the most susceptible part of her face, and that, when she turned pale, the mark altered first, and became a dull, lead-coloured streak, lengthening out to its full extent, like a mark in invisible ink brought to the fire. There was a little altercation between her and Steerforth about a cast of the dice at back gammon - when I thought her, for one moment, in a storm of rage; and then I saw it start forth like the old writing on the wall. (353)

It should be noted that David's interest in Rosa is not one that sits comfortably with him. It can be equated with his earlier fascination with Uriah - hence the feeling that he senses some deviant quality in her - because his attraction is tempered by a feeling of repulsion and disquiet, even when he is confronted by her portrait in his room:

> I found a likeness of Miss Dartle looking eagerly at me from above the chimney-piece.
>
> It was a startling likeness, and necessarily had a startling look. The painter hadn't made the scar, but I made it; and there it was, coming and going; now confined to the upper lip as I had seen it at dinner, and now showing the whole extent of the wound inflicted by the hammer, as I had seen it when she was passionate.
>
> I wondered peevishly why they couldn't put her anywhere else instead of quartering her on me. To get rid of her, I undressed

> quickly, extinguished my light, and went to bed. But, as I fell asleep, I could not forget that she was still there looking, "Is it really, though? I want to know"; and when I awoke in the night, I found that I was uneasily asking all sorts of people in my dreams whether it really was or not - without knowing what I meant. (356)

David's awareness of the significance of Rosa's disfigurement accounts for the fact that he does not want her, despite the fact that she is on offer: "but help yourself, Copperfield!" (353). Steerforth does not want her either, though he no doubt had her once; but where his use for her has ended, David's, as it will later be revealed, has not.

While the part that Emily plays in her own seduction cannot be ignored it has to be remembered that it is David who produces all the evidence that implies her guilt. Given that he never outwardly condemns her, the reasons for what may in fact be an over-exaggeration in his negative account of her character may not seem immediately clear. They become so, however, when one becomes aware of his own precarious position when she and Steerforth elope.

There is no doubt that David had known that in the Steerforths he was dealing with a morally corrupt family but despite early warnings that his relationship with Steerforth would do him no good he persisted, content in the knowledge that this immoral individual was, at least, a gentleman.

David's search for social status is, however, shown to have a cost, and that cost is guilt. The first signs of this are revealed following his debauched night with Steerforth in the city, a night during which he has been caught out by Agnes:

> But the agony of mind, the remorse, and shame I felt when I became conscious next day! My horror of having committed a thousand offences I had forgotten, and which nothing could ever expiate - my recollection of that indelible look which Agnes had given me - the torturing impossibility of communicating with her, not knowing, Beast that I was, how she came to be in London, or where she stayed - my disgust at the very sight of the room where the revel had been held. (423)

We are surely justified in expecting David's extreme reaction following this relatively innocent night's revels to pale in comparison with his reaction on hearing

of Steerforth's abscondment with Emily but, in fact, it does not. He claims to feel a "shock" but any guilt he feels with it is very short-lived. On witnessing Mr Peggotty's tears he records that,

> . . . the impulse that had been upon me to go down upon my knees, and ask their pardon for the desolation I had caused, and curse Steerforth, yielded to a better feeling. My overcharged heart found the same relief, and I cried too. (516)

Unlike Peggotty's tears, however, David's are for Steerforth, or so the passage that follows on from his breakdown suggests:

> I am not afraid to write that I never had loved Steerforth better than when the ties that bound me to him were broken. In the keen distress of the discovery of his unworthiness, I thought more of all that was brilliant in him, I softened more towards all that was good in him, I did more justice to the qualities that might have made him a man of a noble nature and a great name, than ever I had done in the height of my devotion to him. Deeply as I felt my own unconscious part in his pollution of an honest home, I believed that if I had been brought face to face with him, I could not have uttered one reproach. I should have loved him so well still - though he fascinated me no longer - I should have held in so much tenderness the memory of my affection for him, that I think I should have been as weak as a spirit-wounded child, in all but the entertainment of a thought that we could ever be re-united. That thought I never had. I felt, as he had felt, that all was at an end between us. What his remembrances of me were, I have never known - they were light enough, perhaps, and easily dismissed - but mine of him were as the remembrances of a cherished friend, who was dead.
>
> Yes, Steerforth, long removed from the scenes of this poor history! My sorrow may bear involuntary witness against you at the Judgement Throne; but my angry thoughts or my reproaches never will, I know! (516-517)

Or, is David crying for himself, for he is surely defending himself more than he is, in fact, defending Steerforth? In stressing that his discovery of Steerforth's unworthiness was a new one, and that his part in the pollution of the Peggotty household was "unconscious", he absolves himself from any responsibility for this tragedy. Henceforth he delegates the task of meting out appropriate punishments to others, thus avoiding any further involvement in the affair. Ham declares that Steerforth is "a damned villain" (515) and David remains silent. Aunt Betsey refuses to excuse Emily's behaviour and David makes no argument. He does, at

one point, make a meagre attempt at pointing out Steerforth's faults but, significantly, this is to the person who is the most likely to contradict him and, in fact, does. "Who dare malign him?" cries Rosa. "He had a soul worth millions of the friends to whom he stooped!" (872) Rosa, too, plays an important role in the condemnation of Emily and David allows it. Despite the fact that he has the power to intervene in the ugly encounter between these two women he chooses not to, explaining that,

> I did not know what to do. Much as I desired to put an end to the interview, I felt that I had no right to present myself; that it was for Mr Peggotty alone to see her and recover her. Would he never come? I thought impatiently. (786)

No such desire exists in him, of course. David is content to accept Ham's avowal of his innocence - "it aint no fault of yourn - and I am far from laying of it to you . . . " (515) - and from this point shuffles backwards and forwards between the Steerforth and Peggotty households ostensibly supporting them both but, in essence, supporting only himself. The result of all of David's manuevers is that he turns a potentially threatening situation to advantage. Through removing himself as the focus of attention in this account he creates a situation in which the inverted homes which he presents literally cancel each other out. What is left is David, his position as upstanding middle-class gentleman reaffirmed and intact.

> "The first mistaken impulse of an undisciplined heart." Those words of Mrs Strong's were constantly recurring to me, at this time; were almost always present to my mind. I awoke with them often, in the night; I remember to have read them, in dreams, inscribed upon the walls of houses. For I knew, now, that my own heart was undisciplined when it first loved Dora; and that if it had been disciplined, it never could have felt, when we were married, what it had felt in its secret experience.
>
> "There can be no disparity in marriage, like unsuitability of mind and purpose." Those words I remembered too. I had endeavoured to adapt Dora to myself, and found it impracticable. It remained for me to adapt myself to Dora; to share with her what I could, and be happy; to bear on my own shoulders, what I must, and be happy still. This was the discipline to which I tried to bring my heart, when I began to think. It made my second year much happier than my first; and, what was better still, made Dora's life all sunshine. (766)

Just as London is the setting for David's eventual success so is it the setting for one of his greatest failures, his first ill-advised attempt to create an ideal domestic environment for himself with the young Dora Spenlow. It is an attempt that is doomed to failure though the primary reasons for this are ones that David, on the whole, chooses to gloss over. Though he refers in retrospect to his "undisciplined heart" his confession of his own failings in this relationship is tainted with martyrdom; he speaks of bearing the burden of the marriage on his "own shoulders" and gives himself an extremely large pat on the back for having "made Dora's life all sunshine" despite his own questionable happiness. It is as if we are expected to view David as a hero, despite his faults and despite the fact that he has deserved any unhappiness he has suffered.

The character of Dora Spenlow has been examined in such detail that her deficiencies are well-known and, in general, do not bear repeating. That she does not have the domestic capabilities considered necessary in a middle-class woman is a given. Instead she is endowed with a precocious and childlike sexuality; a sexuality that is reflected in both her form and her manner:

> What a form she had, what a face she had, what a graceful, variable, enchanting manner! (451)

> She had the most delightful little voice, the gayest little laugh, the pleasantest and most fascinating little ways, that ever led a youth into hopeless slavery. She was rather diminutive altogether. So much the more precious, I thought. (452)

> I never saw such curls - how could I, for there never were such curls! - as those she shook out to hide her blushes. (455)

It is hardly surprising that David recognises what this form and manner represent, for in Dora he discovers a living version of his dead mother; a living version and an available one. In forming a relationship with this woman David is given the opportunity to re-enter a battle that he had previously lost; firstly, through his mother's marriage with Murdstone and, ultimately, through her death.

This being so, it is also far from surprising that we should discover the Murdstones re-entering the novel at the point of David's first introduction to Dora. Miss Murdstone, as Dora's companion, is a constant reminder to him of what he had previously lost, and her attempts to come between David and Dora mirror exactly her earlier attempts to come between David and his mother, a fact that David appears to recognise:

> Miss Murdstone's heavy eyebrows followed me to the door . . . and she looked so exactly as she used to look, at about that hour in the morning, in our parlour at Blunderstone, that I could have fancied I had been breaking down in my lessons again, and that the dead weight on my mind was that horrible old spelling-book. (617)

Mr Murdstone, however, serves a different purpose, for he is about to embark on a second marriage, the details regarding which suggest that he is anything but a reformed man:

> "Rather a good marriage this, I believe?" said Mr Spenlow.
>
> I explained that I knew nothing about it.
>
> "Indeed!" he said. "Speaking from the few words Mr Murdstone dropped . . . and from what Miss Murdstone let fall, I should say it was rather a good marriage."
>
> "Do you mean that there is money, sir?" I asked.
>
> "Yes," said Mr Spenlow, "I understand there's money. Beauty too, I am told."

> "Indeed! Is his new wife young?"
>
> "Just of age," said Mr Spenlow. "So lately, that I should think they had been waiting for that."
>
> "Lord deliver her!" said Peggotty. So very emphatically and unexpectedly, that we were all three discomposed . . . (539)

The Lord does not deliver Mr Murdstone's intended, whom we discover later in the novel to be nearly reduced "to a state of imbecility" (906); nor does David's discomposure alert him to his own dubious intentions regarding Dora Spenlow. He does not heed the warning offered to him by Mr Murdstone's presence but continues in a course not dissimilar to that of his erstwhile rival. For if Mr Murdstone's motivations are sex and power so too are David's. Evidence for this can be found in the fact that he is already half in love with Dora before he has even made her acquaintance. Her father's material success and gentility are what first attract him and his visit to the Spenlow home immediately strengthens his desire:

> There was a lovely garden to Mr Spenlow's house; and though that was not the best time of the year for seeing a garden, it was so beautifully kept, that I was quite enchanted. There was a charming lawn, there were clusters of trees, and there were perspective walks that I could just distinguish in the dark, arched over with trellis-work, on which shrubs and flowers grew in the growing season. "Here Miss Spenlow walks by herself," I thought. "Dear me!" (450)

David does not even need to see Dora Spenlow in order to know that he wants her, that he should be the one to walk with her in her garden, which Chris R. Vanden Bossche sees as indicating that he "desires the social legitimacy of gentility as much as Dora's charms" (92); not, however, that he is blind to her charms, as previously noted. Having established, however, that Dora is wealthy, by his discovery that she is also young and beautiful he is sent into rapture:

> All was over in a moment. I had fulfilled my destiny. I was a captive and a slave. I loved Dora Spenlow to distraction.
>
> She was more than human to me. She was a Fairy, a Sylph, I don't know what she was - anything that no one ever saw, and everything that everybody ever wanted. I was swallowed up in an abyss of love in an instant. There was no pausing on the brink; no looking down, or looking back; I was gone, headlong, before I had sense to say a word to her. (450)

And so the relationship progresses, with every element from the Blunderstone home relocated into this new setting. Even the young David is there in the "person" of Jip, Dora's beloved dog, whose position is displaced through David's entrance into their lives. It is his approval that must now be sought - "I approached him tenderly, for I loved even him; but he showed his whole set of teeth, got under a chair expressly to snarl, and wouldn't hear of the least familiarity" (454) - and it is onto him that all of Dora's and David's sexual energies are displaced:

> He was mortally jealous of me, and persisted in barking at me. She took him up in her arms - oh my goodness! - and caressed him but he persisted upon barking still. He wouldn't let me touch him, when I tried; and then she beat him. It increased my sufferings greatly to see the pats she gave him for punishment on the bridge of his blunt nose, while he winked his eyes, and licked her hand, and still growled within himself like a little double-bass. At length he was quiet - well he might be with her dimpled chin upon his head! - and we walked away to look at a greenhouse.
>
> "You are not very intimate with Miss Murdstone, are you?" said Dora. "My pet."
>
> (The last words were to the dog. Oh, if they had only been to me!) (455)

That David's early courtship of Dora and the engagement that results from it are concealed even from her father, is significant. Yet what was, at the very least, a severe breach of etiquette on David's part, is one that he admits no knowledge of: "We were to keep our secret from Mr Spenlow; but I am sure the idea never entered my head, then, that there was anything dishonourable in that." (550). Just as with all of his major errors in judgement this, according to David, was committed unconsciously. Having pre-empted Mr Spenlow's objections, thus reducing their later impact, he recreates the entire episode of his early relationship with Dora in such romantic terms that as readers we are necessarily brought to side with him. He is right; Mr Spenlow and Miss Murdstone are wrong. His relationship with Dora is pure and innocent: "What an idle time it was! What an insubstantial, happy, foolish time it was!" (550). This he tells us not once, but twice.

The inevitable still happens of course; Mr Spenlow's expected objections finally out and David is, momentarily, exposed:

> "You are very much to blame, sir," said Mr Spenlow . . . "You have done a stealthy and unbecoming action, Mr Copperfield. When I take a gentleman to my house, no matter whether he is nineteen, twenty-nine, or ninety, I take him there in a spirit of confidence. If he abuses my confidence, he commits a dishonourable action, Mr Copperfield." (614)

By this time, however, we do not view David's actions as having been dishonourable. He has convinced us of his noble intentions and continues to stress them so as to ensure that we remain convinced. Mr Spenlow and Miss Murdstone are cruel; David, however, is only concerned for Dora:

> I fell into such a state of torment about Dora, that I wonder I did not take up my hat and rush insanely to Norwood. The idea of their frightening her, and making her cry, and of my not being there to comfort her, was so excruciating, that it impelled me to write a wild letter to Mr Spenlow, beseeching him not to visit upon her the consequences of my awful destiny. I implored him to spare her gentle nature - not to crush a fragile flower - and addressed him generally, to the best of my remembrance, as if, instead of being her father, he had been an Ogre, or the Dragon of Wantley . . . . (618)

There is more than a faint air of the ridiculous in David's account of his correspondence with Mr Spenlow and, indeed, in his entire rendering of the account of his first great love; but even this, in itself, can be seen as dishonesty on David's part. By adopting a "tongue in cheek" style in his retelling of this episode he evokes a youthfulness and light-heartedness that are not entirely creditable when viewed in the light of his subsequent marriage with Dora. We are no doubt supposed to rejoice in Mr Spenlow's death, without which David would have remained firmly locked out of the Spenlow home - "not such a one as this" did he want for a son-in-law after all - but we must come to the realisation that it is David who eventually threatens to crush this "fragile flower". For, just as Mr Murdstone had attempted to mould David's mother with firmness so does David attempt to apply firmness to his life with Dora, resolving to "form her mind" (762).

David's attempt fails, of course, but not because of any lack of persistence on his part. "I persevered" he says "even for months." (763). It is interesting, therefore, that he should only devote a page of his narrative to this subject. This is, no doubt, in order to downplay the effect on Dora of his disciplinary efforts; for while he admits that she became disconcerted, depressed and nervous (762-763), it is as if it were only for the briefest time, after which he commends himself for returning her to her old happy ways: "She shook her head, turned her delighted bright eyes up to mine, kissed me, broke into a merry laugh, and sprang away to put on Jip's new collar." (765).

It is clear, however, that David's behaviour has more long term effects on Dora than he is prepared to admit. She has been made aware, once and for all, of her deficiencies; her greatest fear has been reawakened, in that she now recognises that there is another who would have made David a better wife: "'You know what a little thing I am, and what I wanted you to call me from the first. If you can't do so, I am afraid you'll never like me. Are you sure you don't think, sometimes, it would have been better to have - '" (764) Dora does not proceed but she does not need to in order for us to understand the import of her speech; for this is not the first time that she has hinted that Agnes is made of better stuff than she. Even before her marriage she had expressed similar doubts:

> "Don't you think, if I had had her for a friend a long time ago, Doady," said Dora . . . "I might have been more clever perhaps?"
>
> "My love!" said I, "what nonsense!"
>
> "Do you think it is nonsense?" returned Dora, without looking at me. "Are you sure it is?"
>
> "Of course I am!"
>
> "I have forgotten," said Dora . . . "what relation Agnes is to you, you dear bad boy."
>
> "No blood-relation," I replied; "but we were brought up together, like brother and sister."
>
> "I wonder why you ever fell in love with me?" said Dora . . .

> "Perhaps because I couldn't see you, and not love you, Dora!"
>
> "Suppose you had never seen me at all," said Dora . . .
>
> "Suppose we had never been born!" said I, gaily. (677)

It is difficult to say definitively who or what killed Dora but there is evidence enough to suggest that it may, in fact, have been David. Though her illness follows a miscarriage (a significant fact in itself) Dora appears to have lost all will to live and to view death as the means by which she can release David from an unsuitable marriage:

> "I am afraid, dear, I was too young. I don't mean in years only, but in experience, and thoughts, and everything. I was such a silly little creature! I am afraid it would have been better, if we had only loved each other as a boy and girl, and forgotten it. I have begun to think I was not fit to be a wife . . . I was very happy, very. But, as years went on, my dear boy would have wearied of his child-wife. She would have been less and less a companion for him. He would have been more and more sensible of what was wanting in his home. She wouldn't have improved. It is better as it is." (837)

The irony implicit in this speech is that it indicates that Dora is not the silly creature that David has both assumed her to be and presented her as being. Instread we see a young woman with an amazing insight; aware of her own deficiencies and her husband's needs. It is, in fact, as if she has read his mind. How is it possible, then, to reconcile this Dora with the child-wife who we have come to know?

There are, in fact, two possible answers to this question, neither of which leaves David looking particularly heroic. The first involves the possibility that David, despite his avowed efforts to form Dora's mind, actively discouraged any attempt on her part to be anything but the silly and pettish child that her education and upbringing had made her. On at least two occasions prior to their marriage Dora attempts to discuss serious matters with David, only to have these attempts made light of by him. At these points it is he that looks stupid; it is during these conversations that he is shown to be at his most "blind".

If we accept this as the solution for the problem created by Dora's coherent death-bed musings then we must accept, however, that David's blindness is, in

fact, a lie; that rather than being blind to Dora's deficiencies he saw them and *liked* them. This suggests that initially he wanted no more than a child wife; a diminutive sexual plaything. This is not something that he can explicitly confess to of course and, luckily for him, it is not something that Dora accuses him of. Indeed, Dora does not accuse him of anything, though David makes it more than clear that he has given her the opportunity:

> "Oh, Dora, dearest, dearest, do not speak to me so. Every word seems a reproach!"
>
> "No, not a syllable!" she answers, kissing me. "Oh, my dear, you never deserved it, and I loved you far too well to say a reproachful word to you, in earnest . . . ." (837)

This exchange can be presented as evidence for the second possible solution to the Dora problem; one that could be termed *David's* solution to the Dora problem.

If we accept the existence of a parallel between the relationships of Mr Murdstone and Clara Copperfield and David and Dora then we must be open to the possibility that David is at least partially responsible for Dora's decline and eventual death; we do not, after all, question the fact that Mr Murdstone is implicated in his wife's demise. If this parallel had occurred to David it must, however, have posed a difficult problem for him; how to expose Murdstone as villain and, at the same time, let himself off the hook for a near identical crime.

Mourning Dora's death would have been insufficient in itself; Murdstone, after all, mourned for Clara but this did not improve his character in anyone's eyes. Rather it served as additional evidence of his guilt. The only solution for David lay in having Dora absolving him of his sins in some way and it is her comments to David in her last days which represent this absolution. There is no telling whether or not Dora actually spoke the words that David attributes to her. It is possible, however, that she did not. Fortuitous as her death may be it is nothing when compared with the pronouncements that she makes before it. It is convenient indeed that she should make a confession of her own guilt while, at the same time,

validating David's own feelings about her inadequacies. It is convenient, too, that she should attest to their youth and innocence at the time of making their match, thus reinforcing David's supposed "blindness". It is convenient, finally, that she should express a desire to see David and Agnes married.

Dora's death, like Steerforth's, provides David with an opportunity to rewrite one of the most difficult moments in his history. The dead cannot, after all, question the validity of his narrative. And what of those who could? It is clear that neither Agnes nor Aunt Betsey would choose to expose David for, in doing so, they would be exposing themselves. Instead, they ensure that David can move on from this experience unblemished in all but conscience.

And how does David remember Dora? Not, certainly, as the sexual young girl who first attracted him; nor as the worn-down wife of a dissatisfied and demanding spouse. His remembrance of her is, rather, of a "child-wife, taken from her blooming world, so young." (886).

> For Dickens . . . London can be a place of helplessness and anonymity. He once told a journalist that, "in a city where 99 per cent are strangers to everybody, people would as soon read the Directory as stop and observe every new face they encountered." So it can be a place of isolation and, therefore, of imprisonment - throughout Dickens' writings there are intimations of the metropolis as a great prison . . . As a child he had often passed the walls of Newgate Prison, and it came for him to stand as an emblem of "the guilt and misery of London" . . . But London is also a place of secrets, each house enclosing its own so that at night it becomes a locked vault of whispered fears or confessions. (Ackroyd 14)

There is, in fact, little to suggest in this narrative that London is a place of anonymity although there is no doubt that it is a city to which people go to achieve it. No better story exists in this narrative to emphasise this point than that of Martha who, having fallen into prostitution in Yarmouth, views London as a city that can provide her with new opportunities; a fresh start in a new "home" where her past can remain a secret and in which she can be shielded from observation:

> Em'ly spoke first.
>
> "Martha wants," she said to Ham, "to go to London."
>
> "Why to London?" returned Ham . . .
>
> "Better there than here," said a third voice aloud - Martha's, though she did not move. "No one knows me there. Everybody knows me here."
>
> "What will she do there?" inquired Ham . . .
>
> "She will try to do well," said little Em'ly . . .
>
> "I'll try," said Martha, "if you'll help me away. I never can do worse than I have done here. I may do better. Oh!" with a dreadful shiver, "take me out of these streets, where the whole town knows me from a child!" (398)

London does not, of course, provide Martha with the refuge that she seeks. She achieves no fresh start here but is, rather, absorbed into the pollution of that city. She is eventually discovered in a neighbourhood that David describes as "as oppressive, sad and solitary by night, as any about London" (747) and in his more

detailed description of this scene we are left in no doubt as to what London itself represents in this narrative:

> There were neither wharves nor houses on the melancholy waste of road near the great blank Prison. A sluggish ditch deposited its mud at the prison walls. Coarse grass and rank weeds straggled over all the marshy land in the vicinity. In one part, carcases of houses, inauspiciously begun and never finished, rotted away. In another, the ground was cumbered with rusty iron monsters of steam-boilers, wheels, cranks, pipes, furnaces, paddles, anchors, diving-bells, windmill-sails, and I know not what strange objects, accumulated by some speculator, and grovelling in the dust, underneath which - having sunk into the soil of their own weight in wet weather - they had the appearance of vainly trying to hide themselves. The clash and glare of sundry fiery Works upon the river-side, arose by night to disturb everything except the heavy and unbroken smoke that poured out of their chimneys. Slimy gaps and causeways, winding among old wooden piles, with a sickly substance clinging to the latter, like green hair, and the rags of last year's handbills offering rewards for drowned men fluttering above high-water mark, led down through the ooze and slush to the ebb-tide. There was a story that one of the pits dug for the dead in the time of the Great Plague was hereabout; and a blighting influence seemed to have proceeded from it over the whole place. Or else it looked as if it had gradually decomposed into that nightmare condition, out of the overflowings of the polluted stream. (747-748)

This scene may be on the periphery of London but it shows the strength of the pollution contained within the city as a whole; or, rather, the strength of a pollution that is not contained, for it is highly infective. The city is not only polluted, but polluting, as is shown by Martha, who is presented as if she were a part of the landscape:

> As if she were a part of the refuse it had cast out, and left to corruption and decay, the girl we had followed strayed down to the river's brink, and stood in the midst of this night-picture, lonely and still, looking at the water. (748)

> "I know it's like me!" she exclaimed. "I know that I belong to it. I know that it's the natural company of such as I am! It comes from country places, where there was once no harm in it - and it creeps through the dismal streets, defiled and miserable - and it goes away, like my life, to a great sea, that is always troubled - and I feel that I must go with it!" (749)

There is also no question that London is a place of imprisonment and that Martha is as imprisoned in this city as she would be if she had been incarcerated in

the prison whose walls she is seen to pass. There is no escape for her, at this point, and, like the objects that surround her, it is in vain that she tries to hide herself. She is sought out and discovered and exposed; as is everyone that comes to this city.

Just as Martha's "solitary figure" is immediately discernible even among the crowds in this great place so is Mr Peggotty's. David claims to have seen him often, "in the dead of night passing along the streets, searching, among the few who loitered out of doors at those untimely hours, for what he dreaded to find." (742).[6] And he eventually finds what he seeks; for Emily, too, is attracted to this place, as are all of those who have been previously categorised and marginalised by David's hand. It is in London that David rediscovers the Murdstones. It is to London that Uriah Heep comes after his dismissal from Canterbury and it is here that he is next discovered, by David of course, in a prison that has as its superintendent yet another of the narrative's villains, Mr Creakle.

The existence of the prison scene in one of this narrative's final chapters is important for other reasons than its inmates; for Mr Creakle's model prison represents "the only true system of prison discipline; the only unchallengeable way of making sincere and lasting converts and penitents" (921). The key to the prison, according to Creakle, is, "the perfect isolation of prisoners - so that no one man in confinement there, knew anything about another; and the reduction of prisoners to a wholesome state of mind, leading to sincere contrition and repentance." (923).

David's reaction to Mr Creakle's "model prison" is a surprising one, particularly when considered in the light of his usual passivity; for, throughout his narrative, David appears to make a great effort not to explicitly condemn anyone or anything - which is not to say, of course, that they are not condemned all the same. David's reaction, in this situation, however, is a passionate one. He denounces the system, calling it a "rotten, hollow, painfully-suggestive piece of business altogether." (930).

Within this narrative, David is shown to be at his most passionate when he considers his position to be under threat; as with his irrational reaction to and treatment of Uriah Heep. This being so, the possibility should also be considered that David's condemnation of Mr Creakle's prison stems from the fact that he feels personally threatened by it. It is interesting that though Traddles accompanies David on his tour of the establishment he has very little to say, either in support of or condemnation of the system; and while David makes his feeling quite clear to Traddles, presumably as a veiled request for reinforcement of his opinions, no reinforcement is shown to be forthcoming. It may be implied by David that what he felt Traddles also felt but there is no real evidence to prove that this is, in fact, the case.

What is it, then, that threatens David in this environment? There is no doubt that part of his discomfort can be attributed to the fact that here he is confronted with the persons of Littimer and Uriah Heep. The latter, in particular, is an individual who David would, surely, prefer to forget. Instead, however, he is brought face to face with him and the two men's roles are momentarily reversed. It is now Uriah who is the observer; with the power to categorise and marginalise:

> "You knew me, a long time before I came here and was changed, Mr Copperfield," said Uriah, looking at me . . . "You knew me when, in spite of my follies, I was umble among them that was proud, and meek among them that was violent - you was violent to me yourself . . . "But I forgive you, Mr Copperfield," said Uriah . . . "I forgive everybody. It would ill become me to bear malice. I freely forgive you, and I hope you'll curb your passions in future. I hope Mr W. will repent, and Miss W., and all of that sinful lot. You've been visited with affliction, and I hope it may do you good; but you'd better have come here. Mr W. had better have come here, and Miss W. too. The best wish I could give you, Mr Copperfield, and give all of you gentlemen, is, that you could be took up and brought here. When I think of my past follies, and my present state, I am sure it would be best for you. I pity all who ain't brought here." (928-929)

David's position at this point mirrors his position within London generally. For while Uriah expresses his desire that David be afforded the privilege of imprisonment it is, to a great extent, a redundant desire; David is, in fact, as

imprisoned in this city and within this narrative as any of his own model prisoners. The prison scene simply emphasises this; for, despite the fact that David decries Creakle's "model prison" it it is not, in fact, dissimilar to the model prison which he himself creates; the only difference is that here he is reduced to the status of inmate; his supervisory powers having been, temporarily, removed.

In terms of David's experience, the prison at the end of the narrative can be regarded as a microcosm of London. David the middle-class gentleman enters Creakle's establishment with the understanding that he will be in control, that he will be the one with the power to observe and categorise. Instead, he becomes the subject of other's observations. And so it is with his observations of London. In his attempts to expose and categorise others he, in fact, exposes himself.

If, however, David is as much exposed in London as he is "exposer" then there are grounds for arguing that someone other than he has, in fact, taken over his supervisory role at this point in the narrative; since it is surely not possible for David both to observe and be observed at the same time. In the final section of this, thesis, therefore, I will examine David's role of prisoner within this narrative and the implications that this has for the narrative as a whole.

Endnotes

[1] How, though, is it possible for us to distinguish this work from his fictions when he insists on referring to it in the same terms as those fictions, ie: "the shadowy events of that imaginative world in which I lived"(930-931) " . . . like the shadows which I now dismiss."(950)

[2] Other critics have other views of the significance of the title that David grants himself, eg: that he chooses it because it indicates that he is a man of property, a man from somewhere.

[3] More correctly, David's profession was suggested to him by his aunt and agreed to by him on the recommendation of Steerforth.

[4] David's mention of the view from the Steerforth home is significant in that it indicates his desire to see this family as being removed from the polluted world that London represents. The truth is, however, that they are not. This family is as flawed as any presented in this narrative.

[5] Where I would question Andrade is, of course, in her assertion that there is "light" in the Peggotty household. However, this divergence in opinion in no way undermines the usefulness of her general observations.

[6] We may indeed ask what draws David out of doors to loiter at this time of night!

SECTION THREE

"I make another Beginning"

"I am David Copperfield, of Blunderstone, in Suffolk - where you came, on the night when I was born, and saw my dear mama. I have been very unhappy since she died. I have been slighted, and taught nothing, and thrown upon myself, and put to work not fit for me. It made me run away to you. I was robbed at first setting out, and have walked all the way, and have never slept in a bed since I began the journey."

David Copperfield (247)

The final domestic cell in the novel which requires some comment in this thesis is Dover, the home of Aunt Betsey and the refuge and haven for David following his traumatic childhood. In many ways Dover can be regarded as being equivalent to the other domestic settings in the novel in that it provides an example of yet another non-nuclear family structure, with Aunt Betsey as parent and Mr Dick and David as her surrogate children. Yet, despite this, Dover does not truly belong with the other domestic settings in the novel for two reasons. The first of these is that very little actually happens here in terms of action, with the exception of Betsey's rather momentous meeting with the Murdstones. Everything inviting examination regarding Aunt Betsey has already occurred and David never really lives here; from the beginning his Dover home serves only as a base. The second and most important reason for not placing Dover alongside these other domestic establishments, however, relates to the nature of Aunt Betsey herself.

The most important thing to note, in the first instance, concerning the character of Aunt Betsey, is the fact that she transcends the structure of the narrative and manages to appear in almost every area of David's life. She is there in Blunderstone before his birth and has had dealings with both his parents. She knows Clara Peggotty and is acquainted with the details of David's childhood. She meets Mr Murdstone and his sister. She is familiar with the situation of the Peggottys and knows of Emily's disgrace. She is involved with all of the circle from Canterbury, including the Strongs. She develops a close relationship with Dora and has a special bond with Agnes. In short, while the majority of the characters presented in this narrative are separated from each other, isolated and doomed to act out their parts within strictly defined geographic locations, Aunt Betsey has complete freedom. She is strongly present in the narrative from beginning to end. We, like David, are always aware of her presence.

There are many things about Betsey Trotwood that make her an interesting character, particularly when she is compared to the other women in this narrative.

She is, for instance, firmly entrenched in the middle-class but does not appear to be constricted by its rules. She is also a self-confessed eccentric: "I have been a grumpy, frumpy, wayward sort of a woman, a good many years. I am still and I always shall be." (705). She is not as perfect as Agnes; despite her domestic competence there is no indication that this woman is, or ever has been, an "angel in the house". Nor is she overtly sexual. She stands on her own, defying criticism and categorisation.

Sexually, Betsey Trotwood is beyond categorisation; for in many ways she is presented as if she were, in fact, asexual. She is female yet it is her many masculine characteristics that are stressed in descriptions of her. Initially introduced to us as "a formidable personage" (51) she is later identified as being "pretty stiff in the back . . . gruffish, and comes down upon you sharp" (245). David outlines his first impressions of her, thus:

> My aunt was a tall, hard-featured lady, but by no means ill-looking. There was an inflexibility in her face, in her voice, in her gait and carriage, amply sufficient to account for the effect she had made upon a gentle creature like my mother; but her features were rather handsome than otherwise, though unbending and austere. I particularly noticed that she had a very quick, bright eye. Her hair, which was grey, was arranged in two plain divisions, under what I believe would be called a mob-cap; I mean a cap, much more common then than now, with side-pieces fastening under the chin. Her dress was of a lavender colour, and perfectly neat; but scantily made, as if she desired to be as little encumbered as possible. I remember that I thought it, in form, more like a riding-habit with the superfluous skirt cut off, than anything else. She wore at her side a gentleman's gold watch, if I might judge from its size and make, with an appropriate chain and seals; she had some linen at her throat not unlike a shirt-collar, and things at her wrists like little shirt-wristbands. (249)

Her character is, however, best summed up in David's account of her relationship with Dora's maiden aunts:

> I know that my aunt distressed Dora's aunts very much, by utterly setting at naught the dignity of fly-conveyance, and walking out to Putney at extraordinary times, as shortly after breakfast or just before tea; likewise by wearing her bonnet in any manner that happened to be comfortable to her head, without at all deferring to the prejudices of civilization on that subject. But

> Dora's aunts soon agreed to regard my aunt as an eccentric and somewhat masculine lady, with a strong understanding. (668)

But Betsey Trotwood may not only be regarded as asexual, as emphasized by her own commentary on her ability to deal with the "tender passions" - "so she put all that sort of sentiment once and for ever, in a grave, and filled it up, and flattened it down" (757) - and by her appearance and general demeanour, but also, perhaps, anti-sexual. This is best illustrated by the similarity between her behaviour and that of the other anti-sexual woman in this narrative, Jane Murdstone: as Natalie and Ronald Schroeder put it: "just as Miss Murdstone strove to find the mysteriously hidden male, Aunt Betsey takes in servant girls to educate them 'in a renouncement of mankind'." (272). In "Betsey Trotwood and Jane Murdstone: Dickensian Doubles" the Schroeders outline a number of ways in which these two women are similar, the most important of which is to be found in the way that they treat the young David. Thus, for example, their shared antipathy to men leads them both to reject him; Miss Murdstone's statement on first being introduced to David, "Generally speaking . . . I don't like boys . . . " (97) being echoed in Aunt Betsey's first words to him on his arrival at her home: "Go away! Go along! No boys here!" (247). Granted, Aunt Betsey does allow David access to her home, and almost immediately makes the decision to adopt him, but it should be noted that her early treatment of David is not much better than the treatment afforded him by his other "aunt":

> She treats David not as if he were a welcome relative, deserving of her compassion, but as if he should be the inmate of a jail, even though he is guilty of no crime. The first night that David spends in her cottage, he is escorted to bed "kindly," he says, "but in some sort like a prisoner; my aunt going in front, and Janet bringing up the rear". And as Miss Murdstone did earlier, Aunt Betsey then locks him in the room. (272)

But while the Schroeders point out the parallels between these two women, their essential argument is based around their belief that following the scene in which the two women confront one another, "Aunt Betsey is almost miraculously

transformed, while Miss Murdstone persists in her rigidly unchanging character" (269):

> Aunt Betsey and Miss Murdstone confront each other as doubles, and Aunt Betsey's dramatic repudiation of Miss Murdstone marks a crucial stage in Aunt Betsey's psychological maturation: a rejection or purgation of an unwholesomely manipulative and misanthropic part of her own nature. (269)

While the Schroeders may be correct in their assertions - there is no doubt, for example, that later in his narrative David presents his aunt as an altered woman - it is possible to take the view that while Aunt Betsey softens she never changes; that, in fact, she continues to imprison David just as she is seen to imprison him at their first meeting. There is room to argue, in fact, that as David is imprisoned in his own narrative, the cause of this is nothing less than the control imposed upon him by his benevolent relation.

Having bathed David, changed his clothes and, most importantly, his name Aunt Betsey immediately dedicates herself to the task of "educating" him; by which term she is clearly not referring to schooling alone. Aunt Betsey seeks to instil in David those qualities which she considers to be the most admirable. She may not be constrained by the rules of the middle-class but she ensures that David will be.

"'Never,' said my aunt, 'be mean in anything; never be false; never be cruel. Avoid these three vices, Trot, and I can always be hopeful of you.'" (280). With these words Aunt Betsey leaves David at the Wickfield's. At this early point in his "education" it can be seen that David is diffident regarding his aunt's expectations of him - "I promised, as well as I could, that I would not abuse her kindness or forget her admonition" (280) - but this diffidence has passed by the end of his schooling. For even if there is some pain associated with this newly acquired discipline it is positive pain when compared to that which he had suffered at the hands of the Murdstones; from this new discipline David soon learns that he has much to gain. His sentiments on leaving school illustrate the change that has been wrought in him:

> I was eminent and distinguished in that little world. For these reasons I was sorry to go; but for other reasons, insubstantial enough, I was glad. Misty ideas of being a young man at my own disposal, of the importance attaching to a young man at his own disposal, of the wonderful things to be seen and done by that magnificent animal, and the wonderful effects he could not fail to make upon society, lured me away. So powerful were these visionary considerations in my boyish mind, that I seem, according to my present way of thinking, to have left school without natural regret. (330)

David's account of his first step towards adulthood reveals one other detail, however, this being that at this stage in his life he believes himself to be free, a "young man at his own disposal", whereas the reality of the situation is that he is very much at his aunt's disposal. For while she is prepared to send David into the world "to look at it from a new point of view" (331) it is, in fact, her own view that she wishes to impose on him. "In a word", David states, "I was at liberty to do what I would for three weeks or a month" (332), but in the next breath he informs us of the price exacted by his aunt in exchange for such "liberty": "no other conditions were imposed upon my freedom than the before-mentioned thinking and looking about me, and a pledge to write three times a week and faithfully report myself." (333).

There is little to suggest that David recognises the extent to which he has been, and, perhaps, continues to be, controlled by his aunt; or, at least, there is little indication that he resents her control even if he acknowledges it. Instead he undermines his early dreams of self-sufficiency and freedom by referring to them as being "insubstantial"; the "misty ideas" of a "boyish mind". David Copperfield, author, and narrator of this history, can be seen as having internalised the discipline to which his aunt has subjected him, evidence for which discipline can be discovered in the parallels he, presumably unwittingly, draws between her instructions and his own developing character.

"'We must meet reverses boldly, and not suffer them to frighten us, my dear. We must learn to act the play out. We must live misfortune down, Trot.'" (560). Aunt Betsey ensures that David learn the firmness and self-reliance which she holds

so dear by creating a misfortune that does not in reality exist. For though she informs David that she is completely ruined this is not, in fact, the case. "'I wanted to see how you would come out of the trial, Trot: and you came out nobly - persevering, self-reliant, self-denying!'" (847).

There is reason to suspect, however, that Aunt Betsey's motivation for not disclosing her true financial situation is not entirely unselfish; for soon after informing David of their reduced financial status she reveals her awareness of David's relationship with Dora: "'And so you fancy yourself in love! Do you?'" (564) Any knowledge Aunt Betsey has of Dora has to have come from Agnes; for it is to Agnes alone that David reveals his engagement. Considering Agnes' later confession that she has loved David "all my life" (937), it is clear that she would not have wanted David to marry Dora and so it is not unlikely that she would have endeavoured to persuade Aunt Betsey to act on her behalf. And though the latter comes eventually to accept David's marriage and his child-wife, this was not always the case. It may be supposed, therefore, that in removing David's financial means she hopes to destroy his eligibility in Mr Spenlow's eyes. The latter's death, in short, may be fortuitous for David but is anything but for Aunt Betsey and Agnes.

What can be viewed as Aunt Betsey's and Agnes' failure with regard to David's first marriage is, of course, compensated for by Dora's death, and David is eventually manipulated into the marriage that his aunt would have preferred all along. It is interesting, though, that in the interim David has clearly been fully "educated"; the dissatisfaction he comes to voice concerning his relationship with Dora, coupled with his obvious recognition of the rightness of Aunt Betsey's choice of partner for him, are evidence enough of this fact. Moreover, we have David's own reports of his material success and the qualities that have made that success possible:

> My meaning simply is, that whatever I have tried to do in life, I have tried with all my heart to do well; that whatever I have devoted myself to, I have devoted myself to completely; that in great aims and in small, I have always been thoroughly in earnest. I have never believed it possible that any natural or improved ability can claim immunity from the companionship of the steady, plain, hard-working qualities, and hope to gain its end. There is no such thing as such fulfilment on this earth. Some happy talent, and some fortunate opportunity, may form the two sides of the ladder on which some men mount, but the rounds of that ladder must be made of stuff to stand wear and tear; and there is no substitute for thorough-going, ardent, and sincere earnestness. (672)

While David credits Agnes with having instilled such earnestness in him it is, in fact, his aunt who first recommends it: "'Earnestness is what that Somebody must look for, to sustain him and improve him, Trot. Deep, downright, faithful earnestness.'" (565). David's reasons for not acknowledging Aunt Betsey's role in "forming" his character are unclear. It is significant, however, that he should so downplay the part of the one person who has, in fact, been shown as controlling him more than any other; it is as if he does not recognise it even as he relates it.

The relationship between Betsey Trotwood and David is an uncomfortable one in many respects, for it is as if they battle for control in this narrative. David has a certain power not held by her since he *is* the narrator, and yet it is his aunt who has, in effect, both made the narrative possible - through creating a life for David which he can recount - and shaped its content. The version of his life that David chooses is so influenced by her that it can be viewed as her version of what a life should be. All the omissions in David's account can be attributed to her. She tells him to go into the world and "look at it from a new point of view" (331) and this is exactly what he does in narrating his own history and the histories of all those others with whom he has come in contact. "I look about me, and make a Discovery", the title of the chapter in which David is sent forth into the world by Aunt Betsey, is no less than a perfect title for the work of "fiction" that he writes much later.

Moreover, the most telling omissions in David's narrative relate to his own and his aunt's life. Of the latter's questionable past we hear much but she is never condemned in the way that others are:

> "There, my dear!" she said. "Now you know the beginning, middle, and end, and all about it. We won't mention the subject to one another any more; neither, of course, will you mention it to anybody else. This is my grumpy, frumpy story, and we'll keep it to ourselves, Trot!" (756)

David may have gone against her instructions in revealing her secret but she is not punished for her admission. Indeed Aunt Betsey is never categorised or marginalised. Rather, her privacy is reinstated and her respectability, rather than diminishing, is shown to increase. Despite her confession, Aunt Betsey's stature, in fact, improves.

And what of the omissions in David's account of his own life? It is, in fact, Aunt Betsey's first admonition to David that holds the key to an understanding of these: "'Never,' said my aunt, 'be mean in anything; never be false; never be cruel. Avoid these three vices, Trot, and I can always be hopeful of you'." (280). It has been argued that these three vices are important in terms of the structure of the narrative as a whole, for they represent the respective flaws in the characters of the three villains with whom we are presented since Mr Murdstone is cruel, Uriah Heep is mean, and Steerforth is, of course, false (Andrade 65).

What is interesting, however, is that David, too, exhibits at least two of these vices; he is cruel to Dora, and in his account of his relationship with Steerforth it is possible to detect at least a trace of falsity. This is nothing, however, when compared to what we sense as David's lack of honesty in the narrative as a whole. As Stanley Tick has noted, "We should observe that as David Copperfield matures he grows less and less honest with himself and with us" (135). And there is little question that this increasing dishonesty is associated with the influence that Aunt Betsey has on his life and on his character; for the relationships in which we most question David's role occur during and after his "education" at her hands. As an

earnest and respectable middle-class gentleman David needs to protect himself and, above all, his reputation. He protects himself and he protects his aunt, just as she has, earlier, protected him. Their relationship is one of mutual benefit.

When we consider the importance of Aunt Betsey in David's life we have also, therefore, to consider the position that she holds in the panoptic structure of this narrative. For though the observations that he makes are his own it is as if Aunt Betsey is at his shoulder while he indulges in them; the view he has of his world is her view inasmuch as it is influenced by the position that she creates for him in society. And this position is a middle-class one. Together, these two create the moral structure of this narrative; they are judge and jury.

"A Last Retrospect"

One of the greatest difficulties associated with any examination of David Copperfield relates to the extent to which we, as readers, are prepared to accept David's version of his life as truth. Certain facts, as related by him, must be accepted but these aside there is much left that can be questioned, particularly events in which he is directly involved. His account of the history of Steerforth and Emily, alone, illustrates the extent to which David's attitude can be regarded as duplicitous and self-serving.

Clearly, however, David does not want us to see him as such, and there is little doubt that his prime motivation in writing this narrative is to validate his own position in society; for though David never explicitly states his overall intentions, his opening statement - "Whether I shall turn out to be the hero of my own life, or whether that station will be held by anyone else, these pages must show" (49) - suggests that he is setting out to prove that he is, indeed, the hero of his own life. It is this, presumably, that the reader, too, should have ascertained by the narrative's close.

Readers of this novel have not, however, always been convinced that David is the hero of his own life. John Jordan, alone, has suggested three possible readings of the narrative and three answers to David's initial question, each corresponding to a particular "class" reading of the novel (89). Despite the fact that he does not share David's view the conclusion that he eventually reaches suggests, however, that which is glaringly obvious; this being that David is the hero of his *own* life, even if we do not regard him as such:

> A middle-class reading of the novel would argue that "these pages" have shown David . . . to be the hero of his life . . . Hard work, earnestness, self-discipline, piety, material success, and a virtuous domestic life count for more than either birth or valiant deeds. David's narrative fully demonstrates that he meets the criteria for middle-class heroism, and although he does not apply this term to himself, his claim to it is implicit in the tone of his ending. (89)

This thesis represents yet another alternative reading of the novel in that, like Jordan and others, I have concentrated on pointing out the many contradictions and "self-serving omissions" (Jordan 89) in David's narrative; my intention being to "bring its secrets to the light". Yet, despite my own faith in the validity of this reading I am still in no doubt that it contains its *own* contradictions; and the many questions that arise require us to blind ourselves initially to the many contradictions and omissions which it contains, in order to concentrate on what it presents as "truth". What, therefore, does this narrative present as "truth" in terms of issues relating to sexuality?

To undertake an examination of sexuality in any Victorian literature is not to discuss sex, *per se* , but is, rather, to discuss matters relating to class; for issues relating to sexuality in the nineteenth century were, to a great extent, made use of, albeit unconsciously, by the emerging, and increasingly powerful, middle class. Through the formation of new codes relating to sexual and moral issues the middle class both defined itself and reinforced its position. The perceived sexual norm, which was inextricably linked with the middle-class domestic ideal, was defined through the identification, categorisation and marginalisation of peripheral sexualities. It is this process that we find exhibited in the narrative of David Copperfield.

> . . . what came under scrutiny was the sexuality of children, mad men and women, and criminals; the sensuality of those who did not like the opposite sex; reveries, obsessions, petty manias, or great transports of rage. It was a time for all these figures, scarcely noticed in the past, to step forward and speak, to make the difficult confession of what they were. No doubt they were condemned all the same; but they were listened to; and if regular sexuality happened to be questioned once again, it was through a reflux movement, originating in these peripheral sexualities. (HS 38-39)

Within David Copperfield's narrative we find examples of the many sexual "disorders" outlined by Foucault in his History of Sexuality. Though the general categories which he outlines in the above extract may be recognised, however, their

existence is further illustrated by outlining some of the specific types which Foucault identifies as being part of the perverted "sub-race" which emerged in society from the end of the eighteenth century: "They were children wise beyond their years, precocious little girls, ambiguous schoolboys, dubious servants and educators, cruel or maniacal husbands, solitary collectors, ramblers with bizarre impulses . . . " (40). Little Em'ly, Steerforth, Littimer, Creakle, Murdstone and Mr Peggotty can all be identified as belonging to one or other of these outlined categories while Rosa Dartle and her "great transports of rage", and Mr Wickfield, Mr Peggotty and Mrs Steerforth with their parental obsessions, exhibit many of the tendencies identified as being deviant. Almost without exception indeed, the individuals in this narrative are presented as being of highly questionable morality and sexuality.

The exceptions to this "rule" are few. At the end of the narrative we are presented with idyllic pictures of David and Agnes, Sophy and Traddles and Aunt Betsey and Clara Peggotty; the latter two now living together in respectable widowhood. Dr Strong is deserving of a mention - "labouring at his Dictionary . . . and happy in his home and wife" (948-949) - having also achieved that balance of material success (symbolised by his ever-present dictionary) and domestic felicity. The rest have in various ways been punished. A large percentage of the cast has been shipped to Australia, voluntarily to be sure, but clearly inspired by the knowledge that no respectable future lies ahead for them in the mainstream world of the novel. Others have not survived their deviancy: Clara Copperfield, Dora, Ham and Steerforth are spared from thorough-going condemnation, but are nevertheless subjected to the ultimate marginalisation and punishment. On the other hand, there are those who survive, only to exist in a state of living death because of their crimes. Rosa Dartle and Mrs Steerforth represent this fate most clearly; for while they are said, when we last hear of them, to be in a garden it is, in fact, no more than a wilderness in which they are condemned to reliving their blighted pasts for

all time: "Thus I leave them; thus I find them; thus they wear their time away, from year to year." (948).

To the extent that this process of categorisation and marginalisation of peripheral sexualities, this endorsement of middle-class hegemony, is reproduced in this narrative, it can be said that David Copperfield is complicit with the general discourse on sexuality as outlined by Foucault in Volume one of The History of Sexuality. There is no doubt that this is a novel in which sexuality is discussed. It is a novel in which a sexual norm is established and, at the same time, protected from scrutiny. It is also a novel in which this sexual norm is redefined and reinforced through an examination of peripheral sexualities.

This is the "truth" that David presents us with in his narrative, and the extent to which he undermines his position during the course of his presentation is, as I have already indicated, in a sense irrelevant. A middle-class reading of the novel supports his position simply because his position is in support of the middle-class. But what of the authorial intent of the other power behind this work, Dickens? As a member of the middle-class it is highly unlikely that Dickens intended consciously to undermine his "hero"; his acknowledged "favourite child". Hence while it is possible to take an ironic view of David's position it is unlikely that this was Dickens' intent, any more than it is likely that David chooses to take an ironic view of himself. That there are contradictions in the narrative is a given; that they were intended is not.

Just as David never explicitly states his intentions in this narrative, Dickens never stated his intentions regarding this novel. He did, however, have a fondness for it that surpassed that he held for his other works. This fact, coupled with his well-known exaltation of the virtues of home and family make it possible to argue that he, like Aunt Betsey and Agnes, is standing *beside* David throughout the latter's rendering of this history.

This thesis has not incorporated a discussion of the general readership of this novel or what this readership's attitudes towards the novel's protagonist were. In Reading Victorian Fiction, however, Andrew Blake presents a number of arguments that are well worth considering when undertaking any examinination of David Copperfield. Making the point that "it can be argued [that] novelists at this time were actually *expected* to preach" (7), he goes on to comment:

> Seen in this way, literature begins to assume more importance in its own right: it ceases to be seen as a reflection. There is a sense here that literature, and indeed literary culture as a whole, was playing an active role. Fiction, then, can be seen not as the passive "reflector" of an already given society . . . Instead fictional literature can be seen as active within society, as being aimed at particular readerships within it, of presenting, *to that specifically chosen audience*, certain types of information and attitude, and helping to form or change attitudes and behaviour. (8)

While I am not suggesting that the readership of this novel was confined to the middle-class there is no doubt that it drew its readership massively from that class. For such readers and indeed for those aspiring to the ranks of the middle-class, David's account of his own history and the history of the many others who play a part in his life can be regarded as an instructional work; one that teaches the virtues of earnestness, hard work, virtue and, above all, domestic purity; one that warns of the dangers of deviance from an idealised norm.

The final comment on the nature of this novel shall be left to John Forster who perhaps more than any twentieth-century reader or critic, can attest to the narrative's true worth:

> There is a profusion of distinct and distinguishable people, a prodigal wealth of detail; but the unity of drift or purpose is apparent always, and the tone is uniformly right. By the course of the events we learn the value of self-denial and patience, quiet endurance of unavoidable ills, strenuous effort against ills remediable; and everything in the fortunes of the actors warns us, to strengthen our generous emotions and to guard the purities of home. (John Forster, quoted in Welsh 149)

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